

# **'War is Heck'**

**Ft. Dix and Afghanistan  
February 2003 – March 2004**

**SFC Dean Baratta**

## **Introduction**

### **Or**

### **‘Why The Hell I Wrote All This Stuff’**

After 9/11 just about everyone who wore a uniform wanted to do something, anything in order to have a part in what was going on. Our national guard armory, probably like armory all over the country, received calls from people ready to ‘do their part’ in the war on terrorism. I was no different, searching for any way I could help out. Also, there was a feeling that this was a momentous time for our country and ourselves as members of the military. This was definitely one war very few of us wanted to be left out of.

So, when I received a call from my armory asking if I’d be interested in providing security at one of our local airports (Lehigh Valley International – yeah, I know, *nobody* has heard of it) I jumped at the chance. After all, maybe it wasn’t as glitzy as what the special forces guys were doing in Afghanistan and they’d certainly never make a movie about it but it had to be done and I felt that, at least in some small part, I was contributing to this new ‘War on Terror’.

A small group of us served at the airport along side a contingent of state troopers. Basically our mission was to make travelers feel safe by looking cool with our shiny pop guns. The job was pretty easy for me since I look cool most of the time, even without a gun strapped to my side. What we probably didn’t expect when we started was what a great time we would have doing that job. We bonded very closely with the state troopers and between joking around on the job and drinking together after the job the time went by far too quickly. In short, it was one of those jobs you get maybe once in a lifetime and then you brag about it for the rest of your days while everyone who hears the story nods politely and thinks to themselves ‘Yeah,

right. Does this guy really think I'm going to believe all this bull?'

But, like all good things, the job had to end eventually and after a short break I found myself on another Homeland Security mission, this time at the Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. I still kept in touch with the people I met at the airport, even though I didn't get to see them very often and in order to keep them abreast of what was going on in my life, I started emailing reports of what was going on in my life.

At about the same time I decided that I should keep some sort of journal about this time in my life to describe what was happening. While I never really thought that hordes of people throughout history would want to read about what I was doing I figured somebody might be interested and maybe I'd have an interesting perspective on this time in our country's history. Besides, I had always been impressed by memoirs written by some average guy in an extraordinary time. If you read the letters of civil war soldiers these guys sound like they could pop out a few Shakespearean plays before lunch and you just know they were dirt farmers with a third grade education. Hey, if they can do it, I figured, I can certainly do better.

Well.....I couldn't. My journal sounded stiff and pompous and I could barely write the thing let alone sit still long enough to read it. I have to admit I was really upset about the whole thing. I wanted to write down what was going on around me but realized that if nobody (including myself) ever wanted to read it I was just wasting my time. So, I thought about my quandary for a bit and realized that what I really needed to do was write like I speak instead of trying to write in the hopes that some knucklehead two hundred

years from now would be impressed with my command of the English language.

The updates I was already writing to friends seemed like a perfect forum in which to do this. So, a bit tentatively at first, I began writing what you have before you. The first entries are a bit short and contain a number of ‘inside’ references because they were intended for a small group of readers but as time progressed I tried to make them more accessible to anyone who happened to read them.

As I was writing these I did try to come up with some guidelines as to what this project would and would not contain. First, and most important, the primary subject of these writings had to be me. Call it ‘only-child syndrome’, a god complex, whatever, I like to be the center of the universe and you can bet I’m giving myself top billing here. What that means is that, with a few (very few) exceptions I don’t mention too many other people in here in any sort of detail. That’s not to say there weren’t people important (perhaps even more important than me – gasp!) to some of these stories here or that only people on some sort of ‘A-list’ got mentioned but this is primarily stories about what was going on between my ears and quite frankly, in my head I’m the most fascinating guy I know. As a result of this I tried rarely (and more successfully as time went by) to not specifically identify people in my updates. I didn’t want my letters to be mean-spirited rants and when I did have criticisms of people it really just didn’t seem too important to actually identify them. I never envisioned this as being some sort of experiment in investigative journalism. Rather, I wanted to describe what I was seeing and I thought other people could relate to.

Secondly, I didn’t want to edit myself. This became much more difficult when, for a time, portions of my writings



were reprinted in our unit's newsletter. I wanted to write about what life was like for me but some people felt that my style would hurt people's moral back home. I did, briefly, start to self edit myself but the whole project became much less enjoyable and once I started contemplating giving up I decided I needed to refocus and just do my thing. I ended up getting dropped from the newsletter and therefore lost some potential readers but I was able to enjoy what I was doing so I think I got the better end of the deal.

Finally, I didn't want to get too preachy and spend my time on issues of cosmic importance. Does anyone really care about my views on free trade or if I believe our fates are predestined or not? So apart from how these 'big picture' issues might affect me directly I tried to steer clear of the stuff on the front pages.

I tried to edit these as little as possible so I just made the spelling and grammatical changes that made them legible, removed the copywrited material and took out the more distracting inside references. I really wanted these to go, as directly as possible, from my head to the reader so I rarely proof read what I wrote until *after* I sent them out. I was always afraid that I would change or delete something while rereading it that really should have stayed in.

I hope you have half as much fun reading these as I did writing them.

Dean Baratta

## **Ft. Dix**

### ***E-Mail 24 Feb 03***

(This was sent out to some of the soldiers in my unit who wanted an idea of what they might need to bring in the event we received orders to deploy. I was certainly no authority on the matter but came up with this list as a 'best guess' on what we might need.)

Well...we made it through another day.

Here's a list of what I'm planning on packing so far. My philosophy in what to pack has three principals:

- 1) Keep it light
- 2) Keep it small
- 3) Try to find items that can serve multiple purposes

You'll note cost isn't included here. Given we have no idea what kind of living conditions we'll be in, I'm willing to spend more if I can get a smaller/lighter item.

Also, most of you know I'm kind of big into the whole 'survival' thing so some (many?) of the items here you could probably not bring and do just fine. I just like to have everything 'just in case'.

A warning: Get anything you want now. So many troops are moving through mobilization stations that PXs and Clothing Sales stores are picked clean. I was at Ft. Dix last weekend and the only thing you can get there is Class A uniforms.

Most of these items can be purchased from camping stores or web sites like Brigade Quartermaster or U.S. Cavalry.

If anyone thinks of anything else that might be useful or better than what's here, please let me know. Also, feel free to distribute this as widely as possible.

SSG Dean

1) A GPS (Global Positioning System) - Land navigation in the desert is supposed to be a bear. I'd rather not have to worry about getting lost. You can pick up one that will serve you for about \$100. Mine is made by a company called Garmin and seems to have a decent reputation. They are very small (about 5oz.), compact and sealed to keep out the elements

2) A first aid kit. Don't go crazy with First Aid Supplies. You want something small that you can either carry with you all the time or at least have close at hand. You're going to be able to do some basics in an emergency, not open up a field hospital and pharmacy. EMS (there's one in Lehigh Valley Mall) has a good selection. I got a fairly well stocked, compact one for around \$30. I'm sure I'll be taking some stuff out of it and adding other stuff before we go.

3) Sunglasses - We may get these issued but if you wear prescription glasses (like me) you might want to get a new pair.

4) Camera - I'm bringing a 35mm as I've heard that digital cameras are a little more fragile. Either way, don't bring one worth too much. I'm expecting all electronic equipment I bring to take a pretty good beating between transportation and the environment.

5) L.E.D. headlamp - You'll get issued one of those funky army flashlights but that's not really going to cut it if you need two hands. L.E.D. headlamps will cost you between \$20-\$30 can weigh less than 3 oz. and take up less room than a pack of gum. Definitely worth it.

6) Mini-mag light - I just like this and it doesn't weigh much. Get the sheath that allows you to attach it to your LBE or Camelbak

7) Eye Drops - It's going to be dry. VERY dry.

8) Frisbee - for some outdoor activity

9) Ranger beads - they weigh nothing and can't hurt when doing land navigation

- 10) micro-cassette recorder - Mostly for sending audiotapes back home. It was a BIG morale booster when Ruth went to Hungary in '97.
- 11) Portable CD Player and speakers: This is a total luxury item. It takes up more space than I want but there's no way I can live without music for 9 months.
- 12) MP3 player: If I had more time to prepare I'd bring this alone as my music player. Very, very small, no moving parts to get gummed up with sand. I'm in love with this thing.
- 13) 550 cord - parachute cord. EMS has it in desert sand color. It's strong, it's light and it's cheap. Everyone should have this. No matter how much you bring it won't be enough.
- 14) Ear plugs - We're going to have a tough enough time sleeping between the heat, flies, snoring roommates. I try to create a little sensory deprivation chamber when I sleep.
- 15) Eye mask - Same principal as above. We might be working on the night shift and have to sleep during the day. It'll be tough enough without the sun shining in your eyes.
- 16) Knife - Get a FIXED blade knife. A folding blade is fine but not strong enough for all the uses you'll need it for. Blade length should be about 4"-6".
- 17) Gerber Multi-tool -
- 18) Whistle - for signaling. Part of my survival kit
- 19) Travel Pillow - don't play this one cheap. You'll be sleeping on this thing for 9 months. Spend a buck and get one that will give your neck/head some support. If you want to go all out, Tempurpedic has one of those 'memory fabric' pillows.
- 20) Camelbak - If you bring nothing else, bring a hydration system. Desert Cammo is going to be almost impossible to get and I've heard a nasty rumor that black isn't authorized. If my desert one doesn't come

in before we leave I'll risk the Article 15 and bring the black one anyway.

21) Purell hand sanitizer: We're going someplace where hygiene is going to be VERY important and VERY hard to maintain. It doesn't require water.

22) Multi-vitamins - Who knows what we'll be eating. At least with some vitamins we'll get all the basics.

23) Foot-powder - Our feet are going to take a beating even if we don't have to hump our bags all over the desert.

24) Chap-Stick - make sure you get the stuff with the best SPF rating you can find

25) Water purification items - part of my survival kit and probably not necessary. I'm bringing a very small purifier but you can get small bottles of iodine tablets for minimal cost.

26) Mini-Chem lights - I saw these and picked them up. Good for signaling or highlighting hazards in the dark. Very cheap and virtually weightless.

27) Wire saw - again, part of my survival kit. Probably won't be needed but it's so small, what the heck.

28) Compass - Just in case your GPS knocks out at the worst possible time.

29) sewing needles - several sizes

30) fishing line - if you get thin enough line you can use it with the needles to do repairs.

31) Fishing hooks/weights - Just in case we find ourselves on the banks of the Tigris or Euphrates

32) Waterproof matches -

33) Bic Lighter

34) emergency blanket/bag - this is a thin reflective blanket that will help retain body heat. They fold up very small and are pretty cheap (I think about \$5)

35) Batteries - plenty of all sizes that you're going to use. We don't know when we'll be able to get more so plan accordingly

36) Waterproof notebook - Stormsaf makes them of various sizes. You can drop the thing in a river and the paper is fine. Use Alcohol markers with it and your notes will last forever

37) Silk Thermal underwear - I know we get issued the Poly-pros but silk thermal underwear is much less bulky and gives you about the same amount of warmth (I used them when we were at the Gap in January and wasn't cold at all). Plus, the set will take up about as much room as half a poly pro top. You can get them from L.L. Bean or (I think) Eddie Bauer.

38) Air Mattress: Not that piece of crap they issue us. Use that as a floor mat next to your cot. A decent air mattress (again, I got mine at EMS) will take up about the same amount of room but make you MUCH more comfortable. I think they run about \$30-\$40.

39) Mosquito netting- I understand the flies can get bad there. You can buy netting loose and figure out how to drape it when you get there or you can buy what are essentially small tents made almost entirely out of that material. I have one and it is designed to fit on an army size cot. It shouldn't be too hard to find something like that on the internet with a little bit of searching.

40) Hammock. Someone recommended this as a way to keep your goods off the ground. I've also seen surplus military hammocks that are enclosed with netting if you'd like to use that as your bunk or store food there.

41) Wet ones - I don't know how often we'll be getting showers

42) Toilet paper - Everyone should pack at least one roll.....just to be safe.

43) Ziploc bags/garbage bags

44) Good sun block -

### **17-19 March 03**

March 17

Mobilization started two days ago. Still very hesitant about the whole mission. I'm hearing too many parallels between Hitler and Hussein but no talk of the role of the U.S. in creating him. No talk of how the US will prevent itself from creating more like him.

Lots of talk on how evil he is and how he's gassed his own people but it seems every is conveniently forgetting that nobody gave a damn about that when he did it or how we left the Kurds out to dry back in '91.

Things are shaping up for our move to Ft. Dix. Right now there are more questions than answers. How long will we be there? When and where are we eventually going to our final destination?

WHAT THE HELL IS THAT????

Starting on Friday my right cheek started to swell up. At first I thought it was some sort of 'mega-zit' starting but it just kept getting bigger. Eventually I started looking like Marlon Brando in the Godfather with those monster jowels. I started to worry when it was reaching 'golf ball' size. Visions of some alien creature bursting out of my face filled my head. Of course that would probably make me non-deployable so I began to suspect Ruth was behind the whole thing.

Finally, it's starting to go away. I was worried it might permanently scar me and affect my swarthy good looks.

18 March 03

Finalized all the last minute stuff to get ready. Packed up the connex and checked out the vehicles. Got to spend time with our newer soldiers. I think they'll work out fine.

19 March 03

On our way to Ft. Dix. We've got an Allentown PD escort. Lots of people were standing along the road to see us off.

Very emotional stuff at the armory. Everyone was with their families and crying, even people I wouldn't have expected to. Talked to a lot of the families of our newer/younger soldiers.

Last month the word was 'don't bring stuff we're not going to need. Remember, we'll have to carry and move all this stuff.' Well, it seems that the closer we got to our departure date, the more everyone panicked and started packing everything that wasn't nailed down 'just in case'. It also seems that there's a correlation between the amount of rank on a persons collar and the amount of personal crap they brought.

I think I'm (finally) getting into the groove of this mission. I still don't like it but there's too much to do not to stay focused.

20 March 03

Heard we started bombing last night but don't have any details. Everyone (myself included) was pretty non-plussed by the whole thing. We're all very confident that we won't get over there until it's all over.



Got to do some yoga this morning, which was good because these beds are crap. There more like hammocks than beds given the dearth of support they provide. Our linen is relatively clean though so I guess I can't complain too much.....

The rooms we've got are also like ovens. The heat is permanently on which creates the unusual picture of having to keep the window open and two fans on while it's 40 degrees outside. Even with that, the temperature has to be pushing 80 in here. We reported it to the maintenance people but they just said that it was good training given where we'll be going.....Everybody thinks they're a freaking comedian.

### **20 March 03**

Had our 'cultural awareness' brief today. We learned the do's and don'ts of dealing with Arabs as well as some basic vocabulary. Really I think all I need is stop (kif), surrender (sell 'em) and my rifle. I don't intend on having any in depth conversations with the natives over there. Besides their words are so hard to pronounce it's probably easier for them to just pick up a gun and shoot someone.

Not much time left....I'll try to catch up later. Take it easy!

Dean

### **21 March 03**

I found out when I moved into my room here that my roommate snores. Now, most people, when you ask, usually apologize and respond a little shamefully, that yes indeed, they do snore 'sometimes' (even if they define sometimes as every time they close their eyes) Even if they

saw more wood than a lumberjack they usually try to minimize how bad their snoring is to avoid being ostracized in the sleep world.

Not my roommate.....

Dean: You don't snore do you?

Roommate: YEAH, BABY! You know it!!! And I'm loud!

I thought he was just exhibiting some bravado and so didn't think it would be much of a problem. Besides, I thought this whole thing through and brought ear plugs with me. Unfortunately, I really needed to get some sort of ear protection geared towards heavy industrial work. When this guy snores, you can hear the pillars of heaven shake.

I know, you're thinking that I'm exaggerating but last night I left my room to use the latrine and could hear this guy through the door and 20' down the hall!

Anyway, I'm requesting a room change. Hopefully, I'll get some sleep tonight.

We just had our SAEDA (Subversion and Espionage against the Department of the Army) briefing today. It felt like a visit from the thought police. They showed us footage from 9/11 and said that's why we're at war with Iraq.

Oh...I forgot Saddam ordered the attacks on 9/11.

-No... that was bin Laden

Ok, maybe he trained those terrorists

-No....that was Afghanistan

Well, surely he financed them.

-Nope, that was our 'ally' Saudi Arabia

Three strikes and yer Out!

Then they proceeded to tell us that we shouldn't trust anyone, anywhere, even other soldiers. The whole this was right out of some George Orwell novel.

This was all in addition to all the side comments implying that anyone who thinks this might not have been the best idea is a traitor. Hmm... that's funny. I don't feel like one. I don't think my parents are traitors. Maybe I just need some 're-education' to unthink these double plus ungood thoughts. Besides, the founding fathers didn't really mean all that stuff about freedom of speech.

## **22 March 03**

I was allowed to switch room the other day! Whew. The world sure does look better after you have a couple continuous hours of sleep.

## **IT JUST TAKES A DOLLAR AND A DREAM**

I started a pool last week so people could guess when we'd leave the country. For a buck you pick a day and if we leave US airspace then you win the whole pot (around \$40). People have taken up just about all the dates to the 20th of May now indicating no one has a clue when we're going. For the record, I picked April 29th.

## I MAY BE CHEAP BUT I AIN'T EASY

For some reason a bunch of people have been coming up to me and telling me that in Spanish my name translates to 'cheap woman'. Hmmmm....I wonder if Ruth would have married me if she knew that before our wedding? I'm also not clear if it's cheap as in 'stingy' or as in 'floozy'. I don't know which would offend me more now that I think about it.

That's all for now. Still doing well and (even if it doesn't seem like it from the letters) managing to have way too much fun here.

Take it easy

Dean

### **Ft. Dix Journal**

#### **23 March 03**

When we got here our commander instituted a rule saying that no family should visit us until we were done with our training. The reason was that they were afraid it would:

- 1) Distract us from our mission
- 2) Have a negative impact on morale is some people were getting lots of visits from friends and family and others weren't getting any.

Now, even though Ruth is only 30 or so minutes away, I had every intention of obeying that order. But....my First Sergeant came up to me today and said "Gee, you live close. You should have your wife visit."

I immediately perked up at that. "Are you telling me it's OK for her to come here Top?" (Top is a common nickname for First Sergeants).

"Well, SSG Baratta," he said " I can't tell you to do it but we know soldiers have a way of making things happen. If you're at the PX and she happens to be there what are you supposed to do?"

Ah ha! A loophole! Essentially this was shaping up like something out of Mission Impossible. If I get caught, everyone can deny responsibility but it looked like so long as I kept everything fairly discreet no one would look too hard for those breaking the rules. I immediately began planning 'Operation Smoochie Smoochie'.

I'm not getting much opportunity to watch the TV coverage about the war. We get a limited amount of free time and quite honestly I've got better things to do than watch Geraldo Rivera tell America how 'brave' he is and how similar he is to the American soldiers.

Also, there's a contingent of people who've monopolized the TV and camp out in front of it watching the news channels as often as they can, even if there is no news. Never mind that the same headlines repeat every 15 minutes. They're also very territorial over the TV (I'm expecting them to urinate on it as a way of 'marking' their property). Now the TV is supposed to be for all the soldiers and it's in a 'day room'. Essentially a big room where soldiers are able to talk, watch TV or generally hang out. This group is very focused however and watch out if you want to talk to someone, play cards, etc. They cast their disapproving stares and occasionally 'Shhhh's at you.

I call these people the 'War Pigs' after the song of the same name by Black Sabbath. They spend all day playing soldier and what do they do with the few hours of time they get to themselves? They dive right back in. I guess they figure that if they needed a life the army would issue them one.

## **The Physical Fitness Nazi**

While we're here, we're starting to do Physical Training (or PT) on a semi-regular basis. My First Sergeant came up to me and said: 'SSG Baratta, you did such a good job at Ft. Indiantown Gap this year I want you to do PT tomorrow.'

Now, I always think it's great to get a pat on the back and be recognized for good work but there was one little problem.

I never did PT at Ft. Indiantown Gap.

I tried to tell him that he must have confused me with someone else but he was pretty insistent that:

- a) I did, in fact, do PT there and
- b) I was very good

So, off I went, scratching my head to plan my training. I got everything together and was telling some friends what we were going to do when this chick stuck her head out of her door and said 'You can't do that!'

"What?!" I replied. (I'm a fast thinker)

"That's not in regulation. You can only do exercises in the regulation!"

"Well, We don't have the regulation." I responded. "I just have to wing it."

"Wanna bet?" She answered smugly. I wasn't sure what her problem was but I must admit I was taken aback by this whole thing. This really wasn't that big of a deal, was it?

"I just checked. We don't have it." When all else fails, fall back on facts.

"I've got my own copy." That should have sent off warning bells right there. If you find yourself traveling with people who carry their own personal copies of army regulations, you've got a candidate for heavy medication. "I had a whole program set up." She continued. "And tell the First Sergeant that I'm mad. I ran PT at Ft. Indiantown Gap and you got credit for it."

Obviously, I was stepping on this persons toes and she regarded it as some sort of personal affront. Now, I was kind of surprised that she didn't sympathize with my position. After all, I just found out that my First Sergeant confused me with some psycho chick. Shouldn't I be the insulted one?

Besides, this PT thing wasn't too important to me so I said: "Well, would you like to do it? Since you know how to, maybe that would be best." But, that wasn't what she wanted. Rather than accept it and be happy, she preferred to wallow in bitterness.

"No, I've got too much to do now." Yeah. Like bug me.

So, I drove on as we say in the army. She didn't, in fact, have the regulation we needed but, instead, only a portion of it. The portion I didn't need.

It seemed like every time I would talk about what I was planning, she would pop up from somewhere and say that particular exercise was forbidden.

Then she told me that I couldn't do push-ups.

Now, the army is built on masses of people doing push ups in unison. Regardless of your job, rank, background, etc. everyone has that shared experience. Now that's *verboden*. No PT for you! Go to the end of the line!

So I pretty much lost it there. 'Well, what'll happen if I do them?' I asked.

'You can't. This is an army post.' She replied. She said it like it was supposed to be an answer to my questions but if so it didn't make any sense to me.

'Yeah, so? What are they going to do if they find out? Send me to the desert? Take me away from my family and friends for a year?' The one great advantage to knowing you're about to be sent to some cesspit for a year is knowing that there's not too much they can do to you in the way of punishments.

I finally managed to get through this stupid training and afterwards she practically runs up to me to inform me that 'That wasn't right. You have to do rotational exercises!'

'But I don't like rotational exercises. So, I didn't do them.' Seemed kind of straightforward to me.

'They're in the regulation. They're not optional.' I suddenly understood what it would feel like to ram my head into a brick wall at high speed. One personality trait that I have that doesn't suit me well to army life is to almost



automatically take a contrary position to anyone who tells me I **HAVE** to do something. Even if it's for my own good. In this case, however, it wasn't for my own good, so I was doubly determined to resist this attack on my free will.

'Well, when I do PT, they ARE optional.' And with that, her trap shut and I rode off into the sunset. Well, actually, I just walked into the barracks but I'm hoping it had the same effect.

I'm starting to remember why I left active duty.

One last thing today. Our officers are drinking like fish. Every night is like a frat house keg party. Normally, it wouldn't be a big deal because they'd be off on their own someplace, out of sight. Unfortunately, they're boozing it up in front of all our new soldiers and not setting the best of examples.

## **Ft. Dix Update**

### **24 March 03**

The phrase for today seems to be 'watch out'. A unit got ambushed in Iraq and we're hearing about Iraqi troops pretending to be civilians or surrendering only to attack when soldiers have their guard down. My mom called and told me 'Don't trust anyone.' That's actually a dicey proposition since I'll be living with 130 people armed with assault rifles. And given that we just heard about a soldier who threw some grenades at other soldiers I think I'll be living in a paranoid's paradise.

The war pigs are still on the march to control the TV. There was no news today but some people were glued to

the set anyway. After half an hour of watching reporters blab about nothing, I asked if I could switch the channel to something a little lighter. You'd think I asked them if I could practice root canals on them. "You mean watch another news channel?" One of them asked.

'No, something other than news." I said.

They looked at me dumbfounded and I think I now understand how an explorer feels when he comes upon a stone age tribe. The look I got said 'You mean the magic-picture box can do more than show news? What other sorts of things could anyone show? Maybe programs about news shows?'

## **Ft. Dix Update**

### **25 March 03**

Operation 'Smoochie Smoochie' went over pretty well. Ruth got here a little after 6pm and we got to spend a couple of hours together. A couple of obstacles did pop up however.

First, I was spotted twice during the night. The first time by my boss. I'll just have to see if there will be any negative repercussions. I'm guessing there won't be as he's pretty even tempered. Also, given my personality, It's noticed when I'm not around so people were asking where I was and why it was so quite. Maybe I'll need to keep a lower profile. Finally, things are pretty casual here and most people wear sweat suits or some variation of their uniform. Therefore, I stuck out like a sore thumb when I had real civilian clothes on. Everyone was asking where I was going. I couldn't think up a good lie so I just said

"Out" and hurried on my way before anyone could ask a follow up question.

### **At least I don't wear a pocket protector...**

Last night we had some instruction on how to properly fire out M-16s. The instructor started the class by asking what kind of unit we were, what our mission was and what sort of jobs everyone had. He picked up my rifle and asked "Does this weapon shoot straight?"

I answered, "Well, 35 out of 40 times anyway." (That was what I last fired when we went to the rifle range).

So he replied "So, you'll only have 5 guys running up and stabbing you with their bayonets, right?"

I hadn't really thought of it that way since I try to be a 'glass is half full' type of guy. Hopefully, this guy doesn't try to get a job as a motivational speaker or a suicide prevention counselor after he retires from the military.

Then he asks me what my job title is and when I told him I was in intelligence he said 'That figures. You look like you're in intelligence.' Now, I interpreted that to mean 'You look like a total geek and probably learned how to speak Klingon from watching too much Star Trek.' If I wasn't so busy figuring out what Captain Kirk would have done I bet I would have come up with a great comeback.

### **Ft. Dix Update**

**26 Mar 03**

Maybe the bullets will be simulated too.....

We've had a couple of blocks of training over the past few days that are required before we can go overseas. A full day on medical tasks and another on chemical warfare defense. As you can guess by the subject titles, this is pretty important stuff. Unfortunately, everything is more focused on just getting 'the ticket punched' so we can be validated and move to our final duty location than on actually having people learn any skills. The army has a motto which says: 'Train as you fight', meaning training should be as lifelike as possible so that if/when we face a particular situation in the real world, we will have already gone through whatever steps are required, making it easier to complete. To do that effectively however requires both time and equipment. Those seem to be in short supply here at Ft. Dix.

On our medical tasks, the word of the day seemed to be 'simulate'. Almost nothing was done to standard and the evaluators (I'm guessing) are under so much pressure to get as many people as possible through the training and labeled as 'qualified' that it's almost impossible to fail anything. Somehow I don't think real life is going to be quite as forgiving.

The chemical warfare training was better but the testing and evaluators were even worse (if that's possible). People were quite clearly not performing various tasks correctly (some were even 'skipping out' on the testing altogether because they didn't want to get dirty) yet everyone was considered a success. Now, I like to get a break once in a while as much as the next guy, but the one time I don't want anyone to cut me any slack is when I'm practicing my reaction to a nerve gas attack. If I don't get it right in training, how the hell can I get it right when it's actually happening?

Maybe the Iraqis will give us a 24-hour notice before they use any chemical weapons so we can get some more training in.

## **Ft. Dix Update**

### **1 April 03**

This is actually a compilation of the past three days since I've been a little too busy to write regularly.

First, on 29th of March, we had so time off and Ruth smuggled me home for a few hours. It was totally unauthorized but screw it. We're not even sure if we'll be able to see our families before we ship out so if I get the chance I'm taking it. As I've said before.....what will they do? Not let me go to the desert?

I got to see my boyz and have a taste of normal life again.

On the 30th of March, we went out to the rifle range. From 7am to about 9pm. It was cold. It was wet. It was miserable. We have a saying in the army. 'If it ain't raining, we ain't training.' Boy, was that true on Sunday. It started out fun but by the end everyone was so tired and in such a sorry state that we all just wanted to get back to the barracks and warm up. I kept telling myself that in a few months I'll be dreaming about the cold and snow but it didn't make it much better.

I passed all the marksmanship skills (daytime fire, fire while in chemical warfare gear, sight the weapon correctly) except one, nighttime fire. What happens is that a silhouette pops up, a few lights blink on it and you have to try to hit it. The instruction they gave us was 'Try to line

up the front sights of your rifle with the target and shoot.'  
Pretty straightforward, right?

That's what I thought. Unfortunately, once I got out there, I couldn't see the front of my rifle let alone the target. It was pitch black. I didn't hit a thing. Lesson for the day: Don't let SSG Baratta fire his weapon at night.

I did pick up a souvenir from my day on the rifle range however. A little something I'm calling the Ft. Dix Crud. My voice is going (which maybe some people are considering a good thing) and my throat is bugging me. A lot of people are starting to hack and cough. I'm starting to get flashbacks of when I did basic training here in 1986. I got a case of pneumonia then. Hopefully this won't be a repeat performance. Normally, if I felt like this at home I'd drink copious amounts of hot tea and whine to Ruth. Here, I have to go spend more time in the cold and wet.

I tried to give me two weeks notice today but my boss wouldn't accept it. Stupid army.

Today we did some combat training. How to react to direct fire (someone shooting at you) and indirect fire (someone lobbing artillery shells at you). I was chosen to be a team leader for both which was fun although you have to keep reminding yourself that this isn't some adventure vacation and there's a real, practical reason you're doing this. It also highlighted how much work we need to do in these areas.

One event was really interesting. We came under simulated artillery fire and all dove for cover. What's supposed to happen is that you're to put on your gas mask and look to your leader for directions to leave the impact area. Everyone's masks were on and I looked to the

Platoon Leader who said "12 o'clock (that would be directly in front of us) 200 meters!"

As the team leader, I needed to get my team moving so I stood up and started waving my people forward. Now we couldn't actually go forward 200 meters due to some boundary restrictions our instructor gave us but I figured I'd go as far as I could and 'simulate' the rest. So as I run up, my point man (the guy in front of the formation) starts yelling something about 'wrong way' and runs in the opposite direction. Now it's really hard to talk and hear in our gas masks, especially if you're running around so I couldn't hear what he's saying. All I know is that several members of my team are running in the opposite direction of the way I want them to go. I turn back to look at the rest of my group and they're still on the ground trying to decide what to do. At this point it was just like some movie. I start yelling 'Follow me!' and waving my team forward. I think that decides it for them and the remaining members follow me.

Just waiting for those Jehovah's Witnesses. A very special view of Ft. Dix.



I get the group as far as we can go and set them up. By this time I'm convinced that the instructor told the point man to 'panic' and run in the wrong direction to see who would follow the commands of the leadership.

Wrong.

Actually, that group did go in the direction we *should* have gone in but I went in the direction that we were ordered to go in. I guess that's what they mean when they talk about the 'fog of war'.

## **Ft. Dix Update**

**9 April 03**

Well, I've admitted defeat to the Ft. Dix Crud and am in a sick call line. One week of hacking and having no voice is



enough. I did have second thoughts however, once I saw the line at the medical clinic. It looks like if you aren't diagnosing an illness or dispensing medicine on Ft. Dix, you're waiting to have it done.

Who knows how long I'll be here? Might as well catch you all up on the significant events of the past couple of days.

About a week ago we went out on a 'Mission Readiness Exercise', or MRE. It's designed to test our ability to do many of the tasks we've been taught recently while in a stressful, simulated hostile area. It started with the drive to the site where we had to deal with 'mine fields', 'snipers', and 'chemical attacks'.

Once we arrived at our new home, we jumped into foxholes, set up defensive positions and waited....

Before I go further, I should mention that the forecasted weather was great. No rain over the entire 3 days, highs in the upper 60s and lows in the upper 40s. This sounded like a cakewalk. The actual weather, however, wasn't quite as accommodating. Temperatures mostly ranged in the 30-40 degree range with enough rain and wind to make things worse.

Our section was divided into night and day shifts with the idea being that once the perimeter was secured and operations established, the people who were 'off' shift would go and get some rest. The resting area consisted of two large tents, one of which had a heater in it. In the other tent, all of our duffle bags (one per person or about 120 total) were placed. As people got the chance they were supposed to grab their bag, find a cot in one of the two tents and be on easy street. There was only enough room for 65 or so cots total but no one thought that would be a problem

since (theoretically at least) there should always have been a bunch of people working or guarding the perimeter in foxholes.

That was the plan.

The problems on the ground though, were many. Cots didn't show up until late, so people were sleeping anywhere they could find. The cement flooring, duffle bags, outside, anywhere there was enough room for someone to lay down you'd find someone sleeping (or trying to sleep). It got worse after dark since you had people getting off shift, either unable to find their bag or perhaps to find it buried by other bags and surrounded by sleeping soldiers.

What that meant is that a lot of us were unable to get the gear we needed. You can get through a cold, wet night without a sleeping bag, wet/cold weather gear, toiletries, etc. but I wouldn't recommend it. Most of us just kept on whatever uniform we had (including what some call 'battle rattle' or all the miscellaneous harnesses, pouches, chemical gear, etc. that we're required to carry) and tried to sleep like that.

Around 8pm, my boss told me she had some work for me to do so I'd have to stop manning my foxhole. I just had to quickly run out to the NCO in charge (NCOIC) so she could adjust her work schedule and cover my loss on the perimeter. So I got all my gear on prepared to move out when my boss said: "Hurry up. We've got lots to do."

"No problem, ma'am." I replied and ran out into the night. I found my NCOIC's foxhole and gave her the news. As I was about to get up I hear the 'pop pop' of small arms fire begin down the line and quickly move towards my

location. I jumped into the foxhole and within a minute or so found myself caught in a firefight.

The 'enemy' actually breached our perimeter at one point and were running around behind our lines. That made things very dangerous for everyone, not only because of the enemy forces but because even friendly forces became very paranoid and therefore, trigger-happy.

After an hour or so the firing died down and I decided to try to get a status of the people in our other foxholes. I jumped out of my foxhole and ran to a nearby building for cover. I got to within 10 feet or so of the building and I saw a shadow rise up from the darkness. I saw a flash from a gun barrel and heard the loud report of a machine gun blazing. I dived to the ground expecting the high pitch tone of my 'MILES' gear to tell me that I've been wounded or killed. At the same time I yell: "Don't shoot! I'm with the 213th!"

The firing stopped then and I heard, in a deep Southern drawl, "Oh, shit. We just shot one of ours." It was a group of MPs who had originally taken up a position to my left and had apparently fallen back during the fight. Somehow, my sensors didn't emit that high pitch whine that indicates you've been hit so I whispered: "No, I'm OK. Don't shoot!", and scurried to the building. Even though it was a simulation, nothing quite focuses your senses like having someone open up on you with a machine gun at close range.

After catching my breath I decided not to tempt fate a second time and figured that regardless of the status of our other foxholes, there wasn't much I'd be able to do for them. So, after making sure the MP's knew where I was going, I sprinted back to my original position. Now in the

movies and on TV, when you see soldiers running around in battle gear it doesn't look like anything special. Let me tell you that when you do it for real you feel like you're boots are weighted with lead and that you couldn't be making more noise if you had cow bells tied all over you. The weight and bulk of the gear make it difficult to get up quickly and soon leave you a panting mess.

The battle went on for another hour before we were given the 'all-clear' sign and I stumbled back into my boss's building. Needless to say, she was less than thrilled that my 'quick run outside' turned into a 2-hour absence. Finally, around 11pm I got released to get some rest and was told to return around 5am. I got to the first of the sleeping tents and the scene inside looks like some sort of refugee camp. People are sprawled out in every available space throughout the tent. Almost all of them were trying to sleep in full battle gear (uncomfortable even in the best of circumstances) and no one looked to be in a state that could remotely be described as 'comfortable'. Seeing there was no place available to rest, I went to the second tent to find it, if possible, worse than the first. This was due to the fact that the second tent actually had a heater in it, attracting people like moths to a porch light.

At this point, I gave up in disgust and headed back to our part of the perimeter. There simply was no place in any sort of shelter to rest so I decided to try to get some sleep in one of the foxholes. I figured I could crouch down in one and get some shuteye while two people on shift stood guard. It would also allow me to augment our perimeter's firepower in case we got attacked again. I found a hole with enough room for three people and wedged myself in the bottom. While I didn't actually get any sleep I did, at least, get to close my eyes for a bit and rest. Hey, beggars can't be choosers.

After an hour or so, one of the soldiers on watch was getting extremely cold so I relieved her so she could go into a nearby building to warm up. Sure enough, shortly after I got into position another firefight started and ran for an hour or so.

Finally, around 2am, everything died down and two new soldiers came over to take our places. I had to get up and 4:30am for the day shift so I was determined to get at least a bit of sleep. If I didn't get any then I'd have to wait until 10pm that night. I shuffled back to the sleep tents hoping some space opened up and to my surprise I found two duffle bags that didn't have anyone on them. I threw myself on the bags with all my gear on, laid my M-16 across my chest and closed my eyes. Even with all the lumps and so much metal and hard plastic digging into me that I felt I was being probed by aliens, those duffle bags felt more comfortable than any bed I had ever been in.

Then I discovered that finding a place to sleep was only half the battle. It seemed that every few minutes people were either getting up to go out and man the perimeter or coming into the tent to find some place to crash for a few minutes. Even though most people attempted to move quietly, the darkness of the tent, the lack of maneuver room and the bulk of everyone's gear virtually insured that you would be reminded of a bull in a china shop. Add to that the snoring of people who did manage to fall asleep and the coughing of those of us with the Ft. Dix Crud (it was running through our unit like wildfire) meant that the noise level in the tent was always hovering somewhere between a 'ruckus' and an 'uproar'.

I'm not sure if I got any sleep or not but either way, 4:30am came way too fast. I was now at 24 hours without sleep and looking at another 16 hours before I'd get another

chance to close my eyes. Still, all things considered, I was in pretty good shape. With the light of day we were able to get a handle on shifting people between duty in the foxholes and rest time. Things were beginning to get into a groove. My boss saw me and came over to talk to me: "Listen, I need to you work in the 'Future Operations' building. We've got a lot to do so you can't waste any time in the foxholes today." Now, I was disappointed because I did enjoy manning the perimeter. We so rarely get to do 'grunt' training that it's a treat when we get the opportunity. But, 'ours is not to question why....' so I went to the building and started work.

A little while later my Sergeant Major (not my direct boss but still way over my head) came over and said "Listen, I need you to work in the 'Current Operations' building. We've got a lot to do so you can't waste any time here." So I told him that I was under orders to work at the future ops building to which he replied "Don't you listen to her (my boss), you listen to me. I'll handle her." Well...what could I do? I went to the new building.

On my way over a couple of my soldiers over to me to ask about being relieved. Some were cold, some needed to use the latrine, some hadn't been relieved in a long time. I wanted to jump in and give some of this guys a break but couldn't. So with a bad taste in my mouth I had to tell them to stick it out.

You can see where this is headed can't you? Sure enough, my boss sees me a little later and says "I told you to work in future ops." So I tell her that I was given new orders to which she said: "Don't you listen to him (the Sergeant Major), you listen to me. I'll handle him." At this point, I realized that we were hurtling towards an Abbott and Costello routine so combined with a cranky attitude born

from lack of sleep I said "Ma'am. You guys need to get this straightened out. I'm being set up to fail here. Work out where you guys want me and then let me know. Until then I'm going to give some of the troops that have been sitting in the holes a break." Then I proceeded to do just that.

They finally got they're act straightened out and it was decided where I'd work for the day. I should point out that it was only about 6am by this time. It was shaping up to be a long day.

## **Ft. Dix Update**

### **9 Apr 03 (part 2)**

Shortly after I settled into my new work area (things seemed to happen just when I was getting comfortable), we received a chemical alarm forcing us to go to what's called MOPP 4. MOPP 4 is a challenging exercise in self-control. It requires you to basically seal yourself off from the outside world. Between you and the rest of know existence is a set of boots, trousers, jacket, gloves and mask. The boots aren't too bad, being basically a pair of galoshes. In cold weather they even a welcome addition to our wardrobe as they help keep feet warm. Likewise, the trousers and jacket aren't too bad although in addition to not letting any dangerous chemicals in, they aren't that good at letting perspiration and body heat out. The real beasts however are the gloves and mask. The gloves are rubber and not only trap in heat but prevent you from carrying out many skills that require even a minimum amount of manual dexterity. To type on a computer you have to use two pencils to hit the keys because the fingers on the gloves are too large to only hit one keystroke.

The mask is the one item that I have a love/hate relationship with. It works exactly as it's designed and I'm confident that it will take care of me if I happen to find myself in a chemical environment. It does limit you however in your ability to communicate with others. Firstly, you have to look out of two eyeholes that drastically reduce your peripheral vision. This requires you to turn your head from side to side, looking like one of the Sleestaks from the old TV show "Land of the Lost". If you're looking for someone in particular you've got your work cut out for you since everyone looks the same under those masks. The jackets cover up our nametags so you basically have to identify people by their eyes and ask around for whoever you're looking for. Talking also presents a problem is that you've got a big hunk of rubber and plastic totally encapsulating your head, muffling all noise you make. The people who made the mask added a 'voicemitter' which is supposed to assist in amplifying your voice but talking remains difficult in the best of situations.

Once you have the suit on your body temperature begins a steady rise. When it's cold out, this can work out great but even in mild temperature and with minimum physical exertion, you can quickly get in danger of over heating. The longer you're in the suit the hotter you get, the more claustrophobic you feel and the slower you go. The temptation is to steal away and break the seal on your mask in order to get a couple gulps of sweet air. A number of people did that but I figured, if I can't keep it together here in Ft. Dix how the hell will I stand it if I have to in the desert? We ended up in the suits for five hours before finally given the all clear signal. People ran outside, ripping off their masks once the word was given and gasped at the cool air like they had been suffocating.



Afterwards we were told to quickly go locate our duffle bags and do some quick hygiene since none of us had a chance to brush our teeth, let alone change our socks or wash up in over 24 hours. Somehow I found my bag quickly and not only got to brush my teeth (which felt like germs had put up several layers of drywall in a radical remodeling attempt) but change my socks **and** wipe a baby wipe over my face. I felt clean as a field after a gentle summer rain.

The rest of the day went relatively uneventfully until 3pm or so. At that point, a rumor started spreading that we would be attacked around 5pm and to 'get ready'. Everyone had gotten their second (or third) wind by this point and were ready for anything. Also, we all wanted someone to pay for keeping us in those chemical suits for so long and getting a chance to get even by shooting some people seemed like just the right level of revenge.

For us, the firefight went well. All of our fighting positions were at full strength and we were waiting for the enemy to come so they really didn't have much of a chance. As soon as they popped their heads up, a swarm of simulated bullets were trained on their positions and they quickly were taken out of the fight.

Night fell and the day shift was quickly coming to a close. I was in one of the headquarters buildings and talking to the officer in charge (OIC) about handing off some of information to the night shift. Since my section consists only of my boss and I and since we were both working during the day, someone would have to assume our duties throughout the night. We didn't really expect a lot of work to come down the pike for us overnight anyway so it shouldn't have been a big deal.

So the OIC looks at me and says: "All right, just make sure you brief up the person who is assigned to work Intel at night which is....." and he scans this chart that's posted on a wall listing who is on what shift. As my eyes follow his to the chart I realize that it's never been changed and I'm still listed as being on the night shift.

"you." He finishes. "You're scheduled to work tonight."

"But I worked all day. And all last night." I begin to whine as I consider the thought of *another* 12 hours without sleep (at this point I think I'm around 38).

"Well, someone's got to do it I don't care if it's you or the major."

I was starting to slip into panic mode by this point but quickly found my boss and she worked everything out. I would, in fact, get some sleep. Or, at least the opportunity to sleep. I still had a problem with where to sleep. There was no reason to believe the tents would be any less crowded or noisy than the previous evening.

Then I got a bright idea.

Since this was our last night in the field we knew that the enemy would take the opportunity to attack us as often as possible so a few of us figured we could sleep in an abandoned foxhole and when the fighting started get up and join the fight. We thought that even though it might be cramped at least we would be stuck in those tents, which were fast becoming like a tuberculosis ward with all the sick people.

So four of us got our gear and found an unused foxhole and climbed in. These foxholes were only a bit more that

shoulder width wide so our plan was for me to sit down with my back against the rear wall of the fox hole, the next soldier would lean their back against me, the next soldier would lean against that soldier and so on. Now, by some coincidence all the other soldiers were females. I must admit I've always dreamed about sleeping with three women at a time but never imagined it would quite work out like this. The foxhole was so narrow we almost literally had to wedge ourselves down in there, while passing our gear backwards or forwards to make sure it was always close at hand. It was more of a production than I had thought it would be, but finally, we settled down into somewhat comfortable positions and prepared to go to sleep.

Almost immediately after the last person got settled we heard gunfire start down the line. Then it started coming our way. Everyone realized we needed to get up quickly and be ready for the attack but that proved to be much easier said than done. We had wedged ourselves so tightly into the foxhole that we had to wiggle bit by bit in order to free ourselves. While the whole process of extricating ourselves probably took less than a minute, it seemed much longer with all the shooting going on. The rest of the plan went rather smoothly. During the firefight, we took some casualties in our other foxholes so we were able to fill those gaps quickly and prevent the creation of any gaps in our perimeter. But after the battle was over we realized quickly that we were going to have to figure out some other way to sleep. Luck was definitely on our side that night as we found open cots and our bags and were finally able to get a few hours of sleep.

Around 2am however, I heard the whistle of incoming artillery (simulated artillery, of course). Now, what we've been trained to do is yell "incoming!", hit the ground and

after the explosion, run out of the impact area as fast as possible. Since I had been pushing 40 hours without sleep and was nice and warm in my sleeping bag I modified the drill a bit. I did yell 'incoming' and therefore gave my sleeping comrades the choice to seek safety or stay warm but I choose warmth. I must say that everyone else in the tent followed suit, electing to stay in their sleeping bags. Now, there was some risk to this move. A referee or 'Observer Controller' (OC) could come in and declare us all casualties which would be bad. To create disincentives to becoming a casualty they make you do things like fill sandbags in the cold at 3am for an hour or some other horrid thing.

By this point I didn't care however. The only way they were getting me out of my sleeping bag was to cut it from my cold, dead body. Luckily for me, the OC was busy killing people in another tent where they weren't quick enough getting out of the tent. Hey....better them than me.

## **Ft. Dix Update**

### **Of Smallpox, Sex and Showers**

**19 Apr 03**

**Remain calm, we're from the government and this is for your own good.....**

It's been awhile since the last update but honestly there hasn't been too much activity since our time in the field. Mostly we've been waiting around to be 'validated' which means we're ready to go. There were a couple of interesting developments though.

First, one night we had to go to an auditorium for a briefing on the smallpox vaccine. Now, the gist of the briefing was that the vaccine was completely safe and that we had nothing to worry about so long as we took some routine 'precautions'. Now nothing gets me quite so suspicious as when you call a special meeting just to tell me that 'everything's fine'. They did tell us however, that we would be, in fact, contagious if we weren't careful. They showed us some pictures of people who had touched their vaccine site and then touched their eyes or mouth and it wasn't a pretty site. So obviously, they warned us that it was of the utmost importance to avoid touching the site AND to wash our hands regularly. The problem, they told us, was that since we're living in the barracks, the possibility exists that someone else might not wash their hands after touching the site and then touch a doorknob, shake hands, etc and pass the disease that way. If you saw how people treat the latrines here you'd be worried about that risk too. I've started carrying around some Purell anti-bacterial sanitizer and use that stuff like it's going out of style.

After we got the shot they gave us a packet of gear in order to take care of our new 'friend', the smallpox pustule. We have to keep it bandaged. After we shower, we have to remove the bandage (while wearing latex gloves), seal the gloves and bandage in a Ziploc bag and dispose of it. At some point a scab will develop on the site and we have to make sure we dispose of it as well since it is also contagious. I was thinking about sealing my scab in an airtight container and giving it to a loved one as a very special keepsake. Nothing quite says 'I love you' like a dried up smallpox scab. After all, you're only likely to have one of these in your life.

For those of you who've read my earlier updates you may recall how I kept my wisdom teeth after they were pulled.

Now I want to keep my smallpox scab. Maybe I'm just so in love with myself that I can't bear to part with even the smallest piece of me. Geez....how self-absorbed is that? Instead I think I'll just chalk it up to wanting to maintain a complete historical record for future generations.

Speaking of future generations, we've been wondering if there will be people who want to reenact this war like they do the civil war and revolutionary war. Will someone, someday, look out over a wide-eyed crowd and say "I'm depicting a soldier from the 213th ASG. Today, we'll show you all exactly what these soldiers did while at war. It may be hard to believe now in our comfortable surroundings, but these soldiers were expected to work in all sorts of conditions and under unbelievable stress. Filing, photocopying, and working with PowerPoint may seem mundane enough tasks but given the extraordinary quantities of alcohol they were required to consume it's remarkable they were able to stand up relatively straight."

I'll need to leave some very specific instructions after I slip the mortal coil on who can be allowed to portray me in the future. I don't want some knucklehead playing me.

Back to the smallpox...

My pustule is just starting to form, four days after the injection and the thing itches like hell. Of course we aren't allowed to scratch it or put anything on it so we just have to suffer through it. It's one of those itches that you just know will feel phenomenal once you scratch it. In fact, if I had a choice now between sex and scratching this damn thing I think I'd turn the lights down low, but some Barry White on the stereo, put on my cool bicycle pants that make my butt look so good and scratch myself to Shangri-la.

## **Can I please have a 5th choice?**

While we were receiving all our medical screening, a lady came in and began talking to us about sexually transmitted diseases. I immediately had a flash back to high school health class and broke out into a sweat. The army has apparently seen fit to put it's official stamp of approval on how its soldiers get some 'Oh, la, la'. The preferred methods of sexual behavior for soldiers are:

- 1) celibacy
- 2) monogamy
- 3) use of condoms
- 4) 'self-love'

Clausewitz must have been spinning in his grave when the army came up with this.

Now, keep in mind that there are approximately 400,000 soldiers currently in the Middle East area of operations. Probably 90% of those are men and judging from the video I'm seeing from CNN, there aren't too many available hot chicks running around. Even if there were lots of 'desert babes' running around, given the Arab proclivity for terrorism, what soldier would put their nether regions in the hands of a potential weenie wacker?

It seems to me that these facts preclude #2 and #3. If there are no women, monogamy and condoms kind of become a moot point.

For those of you who have spent more than 5 minutes with any guy at any point in your life you'll realize that recommending celibacy to hundreds of thousands of soldiers for 12 months is so out of touch with reality that whoever came up with the idea needs to be given a

urinalysis test immediately. Obviously, there was some drug usage when they were coming up with this list.

And that leaves.....'self-love'. I don't want to get into too many details here and I'm really trying to avoid thinking about it but you have to realize that given the amount of soldiers in the region, the Middle East is now probably the masturbation capital of the world. I'm personally looking into getting some sort of bubble that I'll be able to live in while I'm there since I'll be afraid to touch anything.

What would be great would be if the army could give us a pustule like the smallpox one only let us scratch it. Then we wouldn't have this problem at all.

### **A little rivalry**

Our unit is a fairly tight knit group of people with remarkably high moral. Of course, that doesn't stop us from a little friendly rivalry from time to time. I work in a section called "SPO" which stands for Security, Plans and Operations. I like to refer to us as 'the big toe' of the whole operation. Another section in the unit is called Support Operations Directorate or "SOD". While I have a lot of friends in SOD I need to make sure they understand a lesson that one of our newer soldiers says at every opportunity "There are two types of people in this world. Those that are in SPO and those that want to be in SPO." Therefore, I've started referring to people in the SOD section as 'sodomites' and tell them that 'you can't spell sodomy without SOD'. It started really as a little joke between me and one of my SOD friends but it seems to really be taking off among the general population. I'm kind of hoping that the nickname will be my everlasting legacy to the unit. No one has been able to come up with a



derogatory term for SPO yet (how could they?) but it's not from lack of trying.

### **I see nothing!!**

We have two latrines on our floor and in each is a shower area with three showerheads. The area isn't that large so an 'unwritten law' has come into effect which says that no more than two guys will shower at any one time. If a third guy enters the shower area it gets a little too close for comfort in there. Now, I don't really consider myself a homophobe but let's just say in the shower area I take a 'better safe than sorry' approach.

That reminds me of something that happened a couple of months ago. I was at Ft. Indiantown Gap in the shower and someone else was using a different showerhead. As he finished up and was leaving the shower area he slipped and began flailing his arms to regain his balance. At this point time stopped and many things came into perspective.

I could reach out to prevent him falling. Now, there would be a lot of considerations involved if anyone decided upon this course of action. First, you would have to be sure that the guy would not be able to regain his balance. It would be extremely awkward to reach out and grab a naked dude (while you were naked as well) if he was regaining his balance. Also, even if he was going to fall and you stop him, what the heck do you say and/or do after you've grabbed him. Are you obligated to go out to dinner with him or something? With all these unanswered questions the best course of action (to me at least) was to let the guy regain his balance or fall on his own and worry about the consequence later.

My train of thought went like this. If he regained his balance, no harm, no foul. If he fell, well, he still might be ok in which case nothing would be required of me and I wouldn't have to worry about getting into a compromising situation. Now, there was the risk that he'd fall and crack his head open on the tile floor but that was a risk I was willing to take. Of course if that happened I'd be faced with a whole host of other questions.

First off, if he did fall and get seriously injured, what should my first course of action be? Tend to his injuries or put on some underwear and then try to stop the bleeding? Now, if I were to try to staunch the bleeding right away I'd run the risk of having someone come into the latrine at just that moment. Regardless of what kind of humanitarian you are, it would be hard to explain why you were naked, in the shower, crouched over another naked guy. I just don't see how you'd be able to live that one down.

Then, of course, let's say no one comes in and I stop the bleeding. Then, this guy is going to come to with some naked dude leaning over him. As a guy, I can tell you that I think I'd rather have to spend some time in the Intensive Care Unit of the local hospital than wake up with a naked guy hovering over me, probably staring into my eyes and saying "Hey, are you OK?"

Like I said, all of this went through my mind in a split second and I had to quickly decide what I was going to do. So, I weighed the pros and cons, considered that this was a fellow soldier and that I'd probably take a bullet for him if we were ever in combat, and tried to pretend like I didn't notice this guy was slipping over the shower floor and wind milling his arms like crazy. I just kept my eyes fixed straight in front of me and didn't even acknowledge that

this guy was in trouble. Thankfully, he caught himself and I didn't have to answer those hard questions.

## **Ft. Dix Update**

**24 April 03**

### **Pass the Saltpeter please.....**

A number of us just finished a three-day 'combat lifesaver' course. It's supposed to give us the basics to help wounded soldiers if a medic isn't available. The class has a bit of an intimidating reputation because one of the requirements to pass is that you have to stick a needle in someone and give them an IV. It gets some people a little nervous because you the portion of the class that discusses the injection is relatively shot and then you've got a needle in your hand, poking around for a vein on your buddy. I had taken the class a couple of years ago and so knew roughly what to expect. Fortunately, my partner had a honking big vein and it was an 'easy stick'. I've got some pretty big veins as well but for whatever reason, my partner couldn't get the needle in. The first time he pushed the needle all the way through the vein, which is really more frustrating than painful, because you know you're so close yet so far.

After that, we switched arms and found another good vein but my partner was further off his mark. I didn't see exactly but I don't think he even came close to the vein. Instead he started digging around in my arm, hoping to puncture a vein. Now, that WAS painful. When you're doing this you start off nervous because you know you're probably hurting the person across the table. I tried to keep an even composure so as not to freak him out more than he might have already been but at one point he must have hit a tendon or something and my flinch response jumped into

action and I got out a quick 'OW!'. Still, it could have been worse. I'd rather have someone digging around in my arm here at Ft. Dix than when I really need it.

While we were at class some friends of mine started discussing what we were going to do for the weekend. One guy said he was going home because he had to 'mow the lawn'. Now, from the way he said it I (and another friend of mine) were convinced that 'mow the lawn' was some sort of secret code for having sex with his wife. I had never heard the expression before but I'm not always on top of the latest in slang culture. I didn't want to let on that I might not be as hip as the next guy however so I figured I'd just continue the conversation like I knew what he was talking about. Then he started to say some things that sounded like he was sharing a bit too much information. First, he said: "Yeah, I mowed half the lawn last weekend but I need to mow it again.", or "I need to mow it all the time or my wife will get mad" and finally, "My lawn is HUGE. It seems like I'm mowing all the time." Now these statements may seem innocent when you read them but the tone of his voice and this sly smile he had at the time led us to believe that he was definitely talking about something other than his lawn. So we had a 2 or 3 minute conversation about his 'lawn' and how conscientious he was about 'tending' it properly.

Ends up he really WAS talking about his lawn.

I think I've been at Ft. Dix too long.

**I thought you could make good money doing this.....**

The final portion of the combat lifesaver course involved getting into nine man teams and running through a simulated medical obstacle course. They gave us three

casualties, cranked up a sound speaker with all sorts of bombs going off, guns blazing, etc, and were trying to make things as confusing and hectic as possible to see if we could properly treat our 'patients' in a stressful environment. Now among the nine of us we had one small bag of medical supplies that had to go between the three casualties. As we ran up to the scene, my teammate and I were assigned a patient in bad shape. He had an open abdominal wound (they used balloons to simulate his intestines coming out of his body), and a really bad broken leg. I called the person with the medical bag but she had already gone to the two other treatment teams and given them supplies out of the bag. As my partner started an IV, I asked for a splint so that I could tie up his bad leg and we could get ready to transport him. In the confusion of the moment she couldn't find the splint. No problem I said. I'll just break up some tree branches and use that. I'll I need are some large triangle bandages to tie the splint to the leg. Unfortunately, she had already given out all the bandages to the other medical teams.

Uh oh.

Then the ol' brain kicked in. I decided to use his good leg as a splint for his bad one and started stripping off clothes and using my shirt and undershirt to tie the two together. It worked great and gave me an opportunity to strip in public which I rarely pass up. I was kind of hoping someone would throw me some Mardi Gras beads or at least put a dollar in my boot but no such luck.

### **Smallpox update**

Well, everyone's is really excited about the progress of their smallpox vaccines. The site where they gave us the injections is scabbing over and generally turning pretty

nasty. We all seem to be fascinated by them however and show each other our scabs like their pictures of our kids. Everyone seems to be in a competition for who's scab is healing the best and who's looks the worst.

## **t. Dix Update**

**01 May 03**

We just got back from some time off last weekend. A took the opportunity to show some of my Pennsylvania friends a little of the might and majesty of that beautiful land we call New Jersey. I've been telling everyone that Ft. Dix isn't a good representation of the state but nobody's buying it.

We started with a trip to the Lambertville/New Hope area (I know, New Hope is in PA but I figured they'd be going through some withdrawals for Pennsylvania and wanted to help ease them off it). Now, if you aren't familiar with these towns they are directly opposite each other over the Delaware River and are known for having lots of small stores that cater to the hippy-dippy and artsy-fartsy crowds. It also has a fairly large homosexual population. What that means is that if you see two guys walking down the street together, you start thinking they are alterative life-stylers. Then it occurred to me that our little group was made up of two guys and three girls so everyone would think me and the other guy were playing for the other team. Now, that didn't bother me that much because I knew it would REALLY bother my friend. So I took every opportunity to put him on the spot while we were there. I'd make sure to find some REALLY flamboyant decoration and yell across the store: "Hey! This would look great in our den!" Then when we were walking down the street I'd say loudly: "I'm tired of being the only one working at this relationship. You need to start respecting me as an

individual!" It only got better since his reaction would be to get red in the face and start yelling at me to shut up. I'm sure there were a lot of people looking on and shaking their heads saying "That poor man (meaning me). I hope he gets out of that abusive relationship."

Probably the high point of my day was when we stopped in a shop filled with goods imported from Turkey. Buried among the Persian rugs and water pipes was a fez. There were several of them actually but I'm not quite sure what the plural of fez is. Fezes? Fezi?

Now, I've always wanted a Fez and even contemplated joining the Shriners just so I could get my hands on one but now I don't have to get involved with such a shady organization. I'm trying to get our uniform changed and make the fez required headgear for everyone in the unit. After all, the fez is of Middle Eastern origin so we would be showing cultural sensitivity by wearing it and everyone looks better in one. Of course it just makes me look even more like some Taliban poster boy. I'm going to be careful over there.

### **Notes from a human pin-cushion**

We got our anthrax vaccines this week. No problems with the shot itself but about 30 seconds later my arm hurt like hell. The pain gradually subsided but it had quite a kick. Fortunately, it doesn't come with the same high-maintenance scab as the smallpox vaccine had. All these shots have created a new hobby at our unit: comparing injection sites. Everyone wants to see everyone's scabs, blisters and reactions. If you've got pus coming out of the wound you can fill a small room with the people who want to see it. It's like we're all in this big freak show trying to win 'grossest wound' for the deployment.

Before we were able to get the anthrax vaccine we had to answer a health questionnaire. It had the standard questions including two that were specifically designated for females only:

- 1) Could you be pregnant?
- 2) Have you taken a pregnancy test?

The kicker was the next question which was **not** designated as a female only question which meant that everyone had to answer it

- 3) Is there a chance you could become pregnant in the next 3 months?

I wasn't really sure how to answer that one. I began thinking that since they didn't restrict this question to women only there must be some men who could answer this question 'yes'. My brain then began trying to filter through dozens of possible life situations to see if any of them could possibly lead to my becoming pregnant. I'm happy to report I couldn't think of a single one and proudly answered the question 'NO'.

### **To 'de-mob' or not to 'de-mob'**

Well, we've been here in Ft. Dix for about six weeks and still haven't gotten any official word as to when we're going to leave. Given that the war is over, rumors were bound to start popping up that the army would basically say 'Thanks but no thanks' and tell us to go home. Before any of you start reading into this or get all excited let me make something very clear: There is almost **NO** chance that this will happen. I'm only talking about baseless rumors that some people are passing around because they have too



much free time. Now most of you reading this would probably think that nothing would make us happier than to go home and return to our regular lives. I can tell you however, that most of us are filled with dread at the thought. It's not that we don't want to be home but we've been mentally preparing to go and do this mission for several months now. We've trained hard to become 'validated' and get the army's 'OK' to go overseas. Most of us are now in what I call the 'Army Zone'. We thinking, talking, and living like soldiers, which is quite different from civilians. Some people can move back and forth between the two with very little effort. I am among those that cannot. So believe it or not, there are a number of us who are saying that we need to go at least to justify the time and word we've already spent on this.

If you've read some of my earlier updates you'll remember that I was never particularly fond of this whole conflict. By now, even I am chomping at the bit to go. If we do 'de-mob' (short for de-mobilize) early, I think I'm going to have to find some cave to live in for a few months while I decompress and get myself ready to join the ranks of civilians.

### **My conspiracy theory**

Before the war a lot of protestors said that this war was being waged for the oil companies who would acquire vast amounts of wealth if they got access to Iraqi oil. Those people didn't do their homework. The money the oil companies might make from this is chump change compared to the real winners in this war. From my observations, it's the alcohol producing companies that have been driving this war. I don't think I've ever seen so much alcohol consumed on such a consistent basis as I have here on Ft. Dix. If we stay here much longer we'll

have to go through some sort of de-tox program before we ship out.

## **Ft. Dix Update**

**17 May 03**

We finally got a port call to ship out all of our equipment. This is the first semi-concrete indication that the Army hasn't forgotten us and still plans on sending us somewhere. I'm still hoping for Hawaii or Germany but I doubt we'll get that lucky. Why can't we go to war with a country we wouldn't mind going to? Who ever wanted to go to Afghanistan or Iraq? If the suits in Washington were really thinking we'd go to war with Tahiti or something like that.

### **Abandon all hope, ye who enter here....**

Last month our unit started printing stuff from this website in order to let everyone know what was going on 'from a soldier's perspective'. It's kind of nice but I have to admit it's caused me a little bit of heartache. Since the newsletter gets read by the chain of command and family members I'm wondering if I need to censor myself. That certainly wouldn't be any fun and counter to the whole purpose of me writing this to begin with. I'm just wondering what would happen if I said some officer was a butt-head and on the top of my list of fragging candidates. Hmmmm.....maybe I'll save that for when things get boring around here. Although I must say that I've already received an honorable discharge and it might be kind of cool to try to get the whole collection: dishonorable, medical, etc. Then I could hang them all next to each other. I just need to make sure I

avoid jail time. Prisoners buy and sell guys like me for a pack of Twinkies there.

So I guess what I'm saying here is '**Reader Beware**'.

There may be stuff here you don't like to read or might not think is particularly entertaining or amusing but you'll just have to deal with that. You're a big kid now. You can handle it. Most of it is for entertainment purposes or to let me vent when something gets under my skin. Writing this stuff down tends to be cathartic for me and helps me get back on track to focus on the important things.

## **Cleaning house**

Last update I talked about a trip I took with some friends to the New Hope area. I was in such a rush that I forgot to mention a great story. Like I said it was me, another guy (we'll call him Patrick) and three female soldiers (who we'll call: Squidward, Plankton and Panda - although don't bother to remember those names since they don't play any part in this story). Patrick and I bought a couple of cigars and were trying to look cool while Squidward and Plankton (oops....I guess they do play a supporting role in the story) were in a clothing store. Now, this store had regular clothes but also had an 'adult' portion with various bits of clothing and accessories for the adventurous and amorous. So Patrick and I are standing outside the front of the store and this guy comes along and says to us:

"You guys should go in there. They have some excellent toys."

Now, I'm guessing this guy wasn't talking about Mr. Potato Heads or Lego blocks. He was talking about **THOSE** kind of toys. The kind you have to go to confession for after you use them. So Patrick and I looked at each other and

realized instantly that this guy was assuming we were real close friends. REAL close. We quickly went into 'I'm not gay mode' (which most hetero guys know. It usually involves talking loudly about guns or football or some other moronic topic. The effect it usually has it to even make you look MORE suspicious.). So we immediately went and latched ourselves onto the girls. whew.....

### **C.G.S.**

As we've been spending a lot of time together as a unit we're beginning to learn a lot about each other. Sometimes too much. One thing we're noticing is who has what we refer to as 'Creepy Guy Syndrome' or C.G.S. Now, it's my opinion that all of us guys have the potential to be creepy at some times in our lives. What I'm talking about here is guys who are permanently creepy. You know the type I'm talking about. They always seem to have a leer on their face and when they look at a girl you aren't quite sure if he wants to have sex with her or dismember her and bury the remains in the fruit cellar. Or both.

I notice it most after hours when we're all hanging around in the day room. Just let some of these guys here a woman laughing or sounding like she might be having fun and the creepy guys come out of the woodwork like sharks smelling blood. Alcohol makes the whole thing worse and, of course, there's always plenty of booze for everyone. So you have this guy, usually holding a beer, not just leering but looking like a pedophile at Chuck E. Cheeses. It's totally irrelevant if he's involved with a conversation with the girl or not. In fact, sometimes the creepy guys just stand on the periphery of a group of people and stare. Occasionally wiping the drool from the corner of their mouths. There's also a direct correlation between how drunk the creepy guy is and how close he thinks he can get

to the girl. With one or two beers in him, he's likely to stay across the room. Once he's pretty well lit he'll be way inside her personal space.

So in an effort to defeat the creepy guys we've had to adjust our lifestyles a bit. Usually we have to stay out of the day room or other common areas so that trolling creepy guys can't latch onto the group. We also have to keep an eye on the females just in case they get cornered into a conversation with a creepy guy. In that case several of us are highly trained to perform a 'C.G.S. Escape and Extraction Mission' (I've got more than I can count under my belt). If we're going to an area that will have a high density of creepy guys usually we'll establish 'help' signals in advance to call over the nearest extractor. Watching movies or playing games in common areas is usually *verboten*. Needless to say, we're glad we've got a car and can get the hell out of dodge when we need to.

What's even sadder than that is the fact these guys think they're Rico Suave when really they're more like Jeffrey Dahmer.

I've tried to figure out if there is some sort of common trait that all creepy guys have but I can't find one. They're young and old, married and single, officer and enlisted. Some of them are so creepy they even freak me out. Thank god I'm a dude.

## **Rumor Control**

This week we had a nasty surprise when a rumor that we would be de-mobilizing swept through the unit. We've heard these before but this one was taken much more seriously and had everyone on edge for a couple of days. It was amazing how it affected the morale of many of the

people in the unit. Especially since we thought we were in the clear given that our equipment was shipping out. Everyone began scrambling to figure out how they'd become a civilian on short notice. It may not seem to be a big deal at first glance but you should understand that many people quit school, gave up apartments, etc. when we got mobilized. Also, we all figured that we'd be getting paid for at least the next few months. With the possibility that the Army would kick us to the curb with barely a 'thank you', many of us went into panic mode.

The other thing that bothered some of us was the fact that the rumor was spread primarily by some lower ranking soldiers. It seems that some senior ranking individuals, for some reason, feel the need to divulge all sorts of sensitive information to these soldiers while ignoring the traditional methods of passing information along. Just like in a company, information usually flows from the top down. Here, for some reason it skips the middle entirely and goes right to the bottom who pass it up to the middle. I can't say for certain why exactly this is happening but I find it extremely interesting that the recipients of this 'hot-line' information are all young females and the sources of the information are all middle-aged men. I think I'll leave off any further speculation as it might put any career plans I have in jeopardy.....

The good news is that we appear to be on track for a new mission and it looks like we'll deploy after all. We should know more in the coming days.

### **Sky-daddies need not apply**

I'm not sure if I've mentioned it in any of my earlier updates or not but I'm an atheist (think about it...a vegetarian, yoga practicing atheist. I'm guessing I'm not

exactly a poster boy for the 'average soldier'). Now usually it doesn't come up because I'm not one of those violent atheists that objects to the pledge of allegiance or Christmas (hey, I like getting expensive gifts like the rest of you). In fact, most of my best friends and family members belong to some sort of religion. Usually when someone invokes god at a commencement or some other event I just start day dreaming (usually about something that would insure a lightning bolt in the head if there was a god) and carry on.

Lately however, I've started losing my patience. It seems like I can't swing a cat without hearing about how god is on our side (no thanks...he didn't seem to do much of a job when he was on the side of the Jews during WWII), or how we can't live without Jesus (sounds a little too much like heroin to me). Under all of this seems to be the implications that if you don't believe in this stuff, you're some sort of degenerate freak. I just couldn't help thinking while we were being told that god would make sure we won because we're his favorite that there was some dude in a cave somewhere telling his guys the same thing before they drove a car loaded with explosives off to kill more Americans. Great.

Say what you want but when was the last time an atheist tried to cleanse a village of Muslims or fly an airplane into a building? Heck, even the Satanists have a better record. If I didn't have to have sex with a goat I might even check them out. I wonder if they'd let me wear my fez?

## **Ft. Dix Update**

**26 May 03**

**And the winner is.....**

Well, after a couple weeks of touch and go, it looks like we've got a real life mission and will, in fact, be shipping out in the near future. While we've all been focused on the possibility of going to somewhere with a desert climate (like Iraq or Kuwait) it now looks like we'll be heading off to beautiful Afghanistan! This actually suits my plans perfectly since I never really wanted to go to Iraq (see my earlier rantings as to why) but was always behind the Afghanistan mission. After 9/11 I felt very strongly about doing something in order to help my country and Afghanistan seemed the logical place to go. So, when I'm pissing and moaning about how much I hate it there, feel free to remind me that it was my *first* choice of places to go.

If anyone is interested in reading up on this strange land we'll be headed off to I'd recommend a book titled An Unexpected Light by Jason Elliot. He traveled to Afghanistan in 1992 and again in 1996 and gives you an idea of what life's like for the people who have to scratch out a living there.

Did I mention that Afghanistan has more land mines in it than any other country in the world? I've got a feeling that chivalry is going to make a BIG comeback. "No, ma'am. After you. I insist."

For me the best news is that we'll stay on orders for over 180 days. Once you cross that 180 day threshold you can take up to 90 days to return to work after you demobilize. If you're on orders for less than six months then you have to go back to the grind in two weeks. Now, don't get me wrong, I love my civilian job. There's just no way I'll be able to decompress and readjust to civilian life in a couple of weeks. You ever see Rambo? That'll be me. Only



without the muscles or guns and a slightly better vocabulary. I can see the headline now....

*He came back from Ft. Dix but he never could leave it behind him.*

*Today, a former soldier went berserk in a local mini-mall and began a terrifying food fight that lasted for several hours until state and local authorities were able to subdue him. Suffering from P.T.M.D. (Post Traumatic Mobilization Disorder), the soldier reportedly suffered flashbacks from his months in the infamous Ft. Dix military base. This isn't the first time that the poor living conditions, worse food and constant boredom has taken it's toll on America's bravest soldiers but rather is only another example of a disturbing trend sweeping the nation's military bases.*

*The soldier, whose name is being withheld until the responsible authorities can come up with good excuses why they aren't responsible, was forcing passers by to join him in games of Jenga and Uno while ordering obscene amounts of french fries. Psychological counseling is being offered to the victims in order to ease the trauma they have suffered.*

The point is I'm going to need some quality time with myself (no, not for *that*, you sicko) to get my head on straight and ready to be a productive member of society. In order to do that, my plan is to totally drop out of society and try to squeeze as much camping, hiking and traveling into 90 days as is humanly possible. That's the plan. Who knows, maybe after all that time in Afghanistan I'll want to spend 90 days with my butt Crazy Glued to the couch while I watch Oprah and Telemundo while eating bon-bons all day.

The other good news is that this deployment might allow us to wear a 'combat patch'. When you serve in a combat zone you're allowed to wear your unit's patch (or that of your higher headquarters) on your right shoulder and get to wear that patch throughout your career. It's something many soldiers never get to wear. I really want one because I've missed every deployment the military has engaged in since 1986.

### **The Jack Shack**

Since we've moved into our new barracks we've gone from two man rooms to eight man rooms with a corresponding lack of privacy. Most of us have a couple of wall lockers and bunk beds in which to set up our area. A few ingenious individuals have set up their stuff in such a way that when they have the doors to their wall lockers open they can virtually shut themselves off from the rest of the room, thereby creating a little 'Fortress of Solitude' a la Superman. Well, most of us aren't quite thinking on that level so we've dubbed these little areas 'Jack Shacks' since they seem to afford the occupant the perfect opportunity to engage in that 'self-love' that the medical personnel were so gung ho about while we were getting our sexually transmitted disease briefing. Of course, no one wants to think that the guy five feet away from him is having a conjugal visit with himself so peer pressure is being exerted to make sure no one utilizes the Jack Shacks to their full potential.

I was sitting in my bunk shortly after the word started getting around about the Jack Shacks when I realized that my living area was set up as one as well. So now I have to make sure that I leave my area open so people don't think I'm getting a little 'oh-la-la' with myself. Who knew life would get so complicated in the army?

## **I've been to the mountain top and seen the promised land...**

Since we've moved to our new barracks we've gotten a new mess hall. Now the old mess hall was right in the building we lived in so even if it wasn't a five star restaurant at least it was convenient to get to. We actually have to walk to this new place which just seems to add insult to injury since most of us are of the opinion that the quality of this new place doesn't quite match the standards of mediocrity that we had gotten used to at the old place. Not only is the food bad (we've been looking at the prison next to us, thinking that if we commit a minor felony we might get some decent food and work release in time to deploy with the unit) but the staff seems to be overly surly (who knows...maybe they're on work release).

By the way...did I mention that our barracks is right next to a prison? The only difference between their living conditions and ours is that they're surrounded by razor wire. Of course, once we go to Afghanistan we'll be surrounded by razor wire too but I think that'll be more to keep people out than to keep us in.

Anyway. My boss had told me about another mess hall on McGuire Air Force Base which is adjacent to us on Ft. Dix. She raved about the place and said that even though we had to pay for the food it was well worth it. By this time I had decided that come hell or high water I wasn't going to step another foot in our mess hall so figured I'd give this one a shot. As soon as I stepped into that place I knew I joined the wrong branch of the military. Good food, sanitary conditions, lots of choice. Pinch me cause I must be dreaming. Needless to say, I'm spending a lot of my meal time there. I try not to look at too much else on

the McGuire because it'll just make me feel bad. I mean, even the grass is greener over there!

### **And now for something completely different**

I'm not sure how, or if I'll be able to continue this website once we leave the U.S. of A and I haven't quite figured out how to keep everyone informed on what's going on with us while we're over there. What I may have to do is just send out emails when I manage to get updates completed. So, if you're interested in the latest news (and you aren't already receiving emails from me) send me an email click the link on the front page of this site) with a return address and (if applicable) the soldier you're affiliated with and I'll put you on the distribution list.

### **Ft. Dix Update**

**16 Jun 03**

### **Only 270 to go!**

Well, we've been on this trip for over 90 days now. I don't think anyone would have thought there was even a remote possibility we'd still be here at Ft. Dix by now. The downside to all this waiting is that it's definitely beginning to affect morale. The first couple of weeks we were here you would be hard pressed to find anyone who wasn't gung-ho to get over 'there' (wherever 'there' might be) and start getting down to business. Now, apathy is spreading quickly and you're just as likely (or more so) to hear people say they just want to go back home instead of wanting to go overseas. I'm one of the few die-hard hold outs it seems who's motivation for the mission has seemed to actually increase over time. I guess I just don't want this time we've already spent to go to waste.

In addition to that, I've missed every (and I mean every) deployment the Army has been involved in since I first joined in 1986. To get this close and not go would be a crime.

**"...one nation, under 'no pref', indivisible...."**

Every soldier has a set of 'dog-tags' that we're supposed to wear whenever we're in uniform. You have very little say on what goes on your dog tags. You're not allowed to put on your favorite ice cream flavor, ATM pin number, if you're a leg man or a breast man, or any other truly important information. Instead you have to put on such stuff as your name, social security number and blood type. In fact, the only area on your dog tags where you can exhibit even the slightest bit of individuality is when you select your religious preference. In this area you're allowed to put virtually anything you want. Some people may say that declaring your religious affiliation isn't the place to screw around just in case there is a deity in charge of the universe and he doesn't have much of a sense of humor. I couldn't disagree more. It seems to me that if there is a god, he must have an incredibly well defined sense of humor. After all, he created me didn't he? Besides, even if he didn't, I'm sure I could talk my way out of any eternal damnation so why not have a little fun?

Anyway, while I'm thinking up some witty religion to put on my dog tags I currently have a rather bland 'no preference' on there. I think that means that if I'm in need of the last rights, the various religions have a sort of 'finders-keepers' clause on my soul. I have an image in my head of religious representatives fighting over who gets dibs on me. It might be kind of neat for my last vision here on earth to be of a Buddhist monk giving a 'Three Stooges eye poke' to a Methodist minister. Unfortunately, reality

might be a little different. While I'd like to think that my soul is the equivalent of beach front property located right next to a swimsuit model training camp it probably is more like a trailer park located on top of a toxic waste dump. So perhaps the fight wouldn't be one in which the winner got my soul but rather the loser would. yeesh.....

On our last day at the armory in Allentown, my mom asked to see my dog tags. Not thinking, I handed them right over. The she asked "What's this 'no pref' mean?" Uh oh. I've been telling my mom for years that I'm a non-believer but she doesn't believe me. See? Non-belief seems to run in my family. In fact she insists that I'm a 'closet Catholic'. So I knew I was in trouble when I answered "Well, mom, it means I have no religious preference." And then I heard it....

"Oh, Dino...."

My mom has a way of conveying an infinite amount of sadness with those two small words. Ever since that day, she's been trying to convince me to get my dog tags changed and even though I love her dearly I just can't bring myself to do it.

### **Another adolescent dream almost come true....**

As I've mentioned earlier we moved into new barracks recently and one of the more interesting aspects of our new digs is our latrine. The male and female bathrooms each have a shower room and those rooms are separated by a wall. Now, for whatever reason, the acoustics are such that you can hear what's going on in the other latrine just as clearly as if you were in the room. More than once I've nearly had a panic attack when I've walked into the latrine only to hear a bunch of women talking what seemed like

just around a corner. I'd quickly check the outside of the latrine door to verify it had 'Male' written on it before going back in.

The really strange thing about the whole thing though is when you're showering. It's taken a little while to get used to having conversations with a bunch of women while all of us are showering. It doesn't make it any less weird that there's a wall between us and no one can see anything. It's still takes some getting used to. While I've always dreamed of being able to take a shower with a bunch of women, I must admit I never really imagined that it would be in this way. But hey, it's probably the closest I'll ever get.

One of the females apparently figured out that there is a hole somewhere else in the bathroom that looks out onto the male's urinals. I think that was interesting for about 2 minutes until I asked "Why the hell would a chick want to watch some dude pee?" 'Porky's' this most definitely ain't.

### **Can you guess the secret ingredient? It sure isn't TLC**

As we're getting closer to going to Afghanistan, we're finding out more about the place so we'll have an idea of what we'll be dealing with. Seems that the area has such poor sanitary conditions that the biggest health risks are contaminated food and water. Contaminated with what, you ask?

Fecal matter.

In other words....poop.

It seems everything is contaminated. Even the dust. That's right. We can expect to get a snout full of crap every time the wind whips up. We've been insured that there are no

long term health risks to this but that only makes me feel slightly better. I mean, we're talking about crap being *everywhere!* I think I'm going to bring a big plastic bubble with me that I'll live in.

## **Ft. Dix Update**

**20 Jun 03**

### **And now the time has come.....**

Well, it looks like we're finally getting the hell out of Ft. Dix and on to actually doing something. I'm pretty excited about the whole thing but can't talk too much more about it at this point. Other than that there hasn't been a great deal of activity here so this update is a bit lean. I'm expecting a lot more to be coming down the pike soon however since I'll have a whole new world to figure out. You may not want to try calling anyone on Ft. Dix from now on. Now that we've got the word that we're going, there's going to be a huge rush to try and finish all the alcohol that's laying around the barracks. I've already heard people trying to figure out how to smuggle it into Afghanistan. I think the whole thing is kind of silly myself. What's the big deal about alcohol? After all, we're going to Afghanistan! I just want to immerse myself totally in the culture. Oh...by the way, did I mention that Afghanistan is the poppy growing capital of the world? You know what that means: *hash.....opium.....heroin!!!* Woohoo! I know what kind of souvenirs I'm bringing back for everyone.

### **Some side effects may occur**

One sure sign that we're really leaving the country is that we were issued (and told to start taking) malaria pills today. Now, I want to avoid malaria as much as the next



guy but for the past year or so I've been hearing some bad things about these pills. You may remember that there was a number of murders/suicides reported out of Ft. Bragg awhile ago. Well, one of the potential reasons investigators thought soldiers were cracking and going over the edge was these malaria pills. You see, in a small percentage of people who take them, one of the side effects of the medication is psychotic episodes.

Let me say that again. ***Psychotic episodes***.

Now, what concerns me is that we're going to have a bunch of people carrying loaded M-16s around taking medication that may cause ***psychotic episodes***. Well, at least it doesn't look like we'll be bored over there. If I'm not one of the people be comes down with some weird psychosis I'll end up being paranoid thinking that everyone is just one pill away from going postal on me. All that stress from always having to check over my shoulder is likely to send me over the edge.

I'm thinking that this may actually be a great opportunity to try out a whole host of anti-social behaviors. If I do something really bad I'll just say that it was the malaria medicine. I'm sure I won't have any difficulty getting people to testify that I was barely functional under the best of circumstances and combined with the stress of being in a combat zone and this medicine I should be able to get away with just about anything. He, he he....the world is my oyster.

### **How'd my mom get my work number?**

I got an email from my boss last week. He read my last update where I mention that I've put 'no preference' as my religion on my dog tags. His response....."Listen to your

mother." Great...I'll probably see this on my performance appraisal when I get home. I'm sure my mom is putting calls into the Donald Rumsfeld to turn the screws a little tighter. She did promise to stop trying to guilt me into changing them. When she said that I thought I was home free but now I realize that she's got a loophole. She never promised that she wouldn't get other people to try to guilt me into doing it. I'm beginning to understand where my devious side came from now.

### **One size fits all.....**

Just recently I went to the military clothing sales store to purchase a new set of gym shorts and a couple of T-shirts. When I got there I was surprised to find that the only sizes in stock were small and XXL. Not just 'extra large' but 'extra - extra (in other words.....freaking HUGE) large. Now I'm a medium or a large and I was really pissed to see rows of these two other sizes but nothing else in between. I mean, it seems to me (especially if we're talking about work out clothes) that if you need to wear 'XXL' clothes you probably aren't the type of person who works out regularly. If you don't work out regularly, you probably don't need extra sets of work out clothes. So why have tons of these rejects from Omar the Tentmakers' workshop lining the shelves while all the normal sizes are out of stock?

Why do I need extra gym clothes? Well, the only thing we're allowed to wear over there is our camouflage uniforms (called DCUs or Desert Combat Uniforms or the 'official' army physical fitness uniform). I think it's all a big scam on the part of the clothing manufacturers and so therefore am already planning ways to break that rule. I packed a bright red Hawaiian shirt that I'm dying to wear once I'm over there. I saw way too many episodes of

M\*A\*S\*H to pass up that opportunity. Besides, I'm really upset that I'm going to miss the chance to wear both my wet suit AND my bike shorts this year. I don't feel bad for myself you understand, it's just that the world is going to be deprived of the opportunity to see how fantastic my butt looks in those outfits. I'm telling you, it's going to be like when Valentino died once word gets out that I won't be out this summer. Women all over the eastern seaboard are going to be spiraling into fits of depression and despair.

As a concession, I did recently purchase a bike shirt that I can wear with my uniform since it's just the right shade of brown. While my upper body may not be my best feature I still look incredibly hot in it (and it's easier to stare at myself in the mirror without being too obvious unlike when I'm checking out my butt). I should be able to have glossy 8x10s available for those that are interested in a month or so. Order now! Supplies will be limited!

### **Just eat the corn and don't ask too many questions.....**

I was in the mess hall the other day and they were serving fried okra. I happen to really like fried okra and started wondering why it wasn't served more frequently. In fact, as I thought about it a little more (there was a long line to pay for lunch so I had time to think), there are a number of vegetables that seem to be under utilized and under appreciated. What Darwinian selection process occurred to make some vegetables popular while others languish in the discounted bin? Then, a more sinister thought crossed my mind. What if there was some sort of shadowy vegetable mafia? They'd be pushing their veggies instead of those of rival 'families'. If that is in fact the case, then it seems that the corn and pea people seem to have a pretty good lock on this country. Maybe they send people to restaurants around the country and say things like "Nice place you got here.

Be a shame if something happened to it. We don't want to see any more broccoli on the menu. Stick to corn and nobody gets hurt."

Then I began wondering if there are fruit mafia groups too. I mean apples and oranges are everywhere. Who's keeping the papayas down? Why aren't we getting fresh guava? I know these may be dangerous questions to ask but until we all stand together against this fruit and vegetable fascism we'll never truly be a free people.

Uh oh.....I think those malaria pills are kicking in.....

# **Afghanistan**

## **Afghanistan Update #1**

**8 Jul 03**

Hi from Afghanistan!

>

>> I'm here safe and sound

>>

>> weather's hot

>>

>> food's bad

>>

>> toilet's worse

>>

>> dust in everything

>>

>> landmines everywhere

>>

>> Having a great time!

>>

>> Dean

>



A typical scene in Afghanistan. Note the dull brown color, that's pretty much the only color you see around here. The stripped down husk of a Soviet military vehicle sets the appropriate mood for newly arriving soldiers.

Well, here I am in sunny Bagram, Afghanistan! It took us about 24 hours to get here from Ft. Dix. We went via Newfoundland, Ireland, Turkey and Kyrgyzstan (yes, that's a real country and is apparently suffering from a lack of vowels. Won't you please help? Your spare 'i's, 'o's and 'u's, even any 'y's you might have laying around the house. They're desperate.) Except for the last stop we only stayed an hour or so at each place so I didn't get to explore any more than the airport gift shops. We flew into Ireland late at night so the only shade of green I saw was on the exit sign.

Our last stop before Bagram was at an Air Force base in Kyrgyzstan. Once we got there we had a chance to shower and rest up a bit before we moved on to 'Our FINAL DESTINATION!!!' Up to that point we had flown in chartered civilian airlines but the flight into Afghanistan is

considered a combat mission and has to be flown via military transports. The plane we flew are known as C-130s and we were scheduled to be the first flight in. The 'A' team.

Oh yeah....

One of the crew (known as the loadmaster) gave us our safety briefing and told us "I'm the most shot at loadmaster in this theater of operations."

Great. I guess (if you're a glass is half full kind of guy) you could think that was a good thing since this guy knew the ropes and made it through without a scratch.

If you were a glass is half empty type though, you would probably note that he didn't mention how the other people he flew with fared on his little expeditions or maybe you'd think that after all this time dodging the bullet, perhaps his number was coming up and you'd just be some schlep who happened to go along for the ride.

Fortunately, I'm a glass is half full kind of guy.

The best way to describe the inside of one of these C-130s is to think of a giant U-haul that has some seats with nylon webbing material for your back. Further towards the back of the plane were two pallets loaded with our weapons and gear.

So we strapped ourselves in and the crew fired up the engines and started their pre flight checks. Just at that point one of our little group pointed and said "That looks like a leak." Sure enough, fluid was dripping out of the plane onto our gear.

Uh oh...

So they checked it out and determined it was hydraulic fluid which, I guess, is something you need. In the end it only delayed the flight a couple of hours but we hoped this wasn't an omen of things to come.

The flight itself went smoothly and without note except that I now have bragging rights that (technically, at least) I've been on a combat mission. I won't mention the fact that I spent most of time trying to sleep.

That brings us to Bagram. The place is really like nothing I've ever seen before. We're living in tents that sleep 8-12 people. They do have heat in them and are actually working on getting us air conditioners in them since the summer heat turns them into 'Easy Bake Ovens' during the day. Knowing the Army, the air conditioners will be installed sometime after the first frost of the year.





The tents we would call home for nine months. When we first got there (in the height of summer) we learned what it would be like to live in an oven. The Army took pity on us having to live with the intense heat and arranged for us to get air conditioning. It was installed just in time for winter.

The place itself reminds me of the army bases you see in some of the Vietnam movies or in *Black Hawk Down*. Planes and helicopters are flying overhead, everyone is carrying loaded weapons, etc. etc.

It's been really hot here (although not as hot as it would have been if we were in Iraq now) and we are drinking a huge amount of water. I seem to be sweating it out just about as fast as I can drink it. The problem is that we're drinking so much that they can't keep anything in refrigerators long enough for it to get cold. Almost as soon as they stock the shelves they're empty again. The result is that we usually drink stuff at a temperature I affectionately call 'piss hot'. On the rare occasion when we can score a cool drink it's like manna from heaven. People pass the word around like they've just found a dealer who sells

really good weed. 'Hey, go to that far cooler. There are some cold sodas all the way in the back.'

But hey, it's a dry heat.

Back to the water.

The bottled water we do get is from the United Arab Emirates which totally confuses me. I thought all those countries were deserts. I thought their big problem was that they didn't have ENOUGH water.

Note to U.A.E.: Your country might not be a desert wasteland if you'd stop exporting water!

The other interesting thing about the water is that it apparently contains a fair amount of impurities compared to bottled water we get in the states. When we came here, they told us to smell the water before we drink it because some have reportedly had traces of fuel in them.  
mmmmmmmmmmmm

"I'll take a glass of ice water with a slice of lemon and a shot of diesel please."

Even when you get a no-octane drink of water (and to be honest, I haven't personally seen or talked to anyone who's found fuel in their water) it still has some problems. The PH of this stuff can be as high as 8.1. Now, I don't remember much of chemistry but I know water is supposed to be close to 7.

Also, the water is getting blamed for a rash of cases of kidney stones among the soldiers here. Cool....I may not even have to buy any souvenirs here. I'll just pee them out. Check your mail boxes folks! If you're lucky, maybe all of you will get one of my kidney stones suitable for framing

or setting in some jewelry.

DUST.....probably the one thing Bagram is most famous for. It's everywhere and it's not the dust we have in the states. This stuff is like brown talcum powder. It kicks up at the slightest breeze and gets into everything. By the end of the day, my hair feels like brittle straw because so much dust has fused into it.

Just when I start thinking I'm getting a really great tan, I wash up and get about three shades lighter from all the dust I've collected.

We're also in a period called "The wind of 120 days" which (like the name implies) is a weather storm characterized by constant wind that lasts (you guessed it) about 120 days. This dust totally obscures mountains that ring our base. And these are big, honking mountains.

Another interesting thing about this place is the time. We don't run on the actual time it is here. Rather, we run on something called 'zulu time' which is also known as Greenwich Mean Time or GMT. The reason is that everyone needs an easy way to coordinate things between us in Afghanistan, headquarters (which is in Qatar) and Washington DC. That way everyone won't be wondering 'Is that attack for 8am my time, Qatar time or DC time?'

What that means for me here is that everything is out of skew by 4 and a half hours (the time difference between zulu time and the actual time here). So I get up around midnight when the sun rises, eat dinner at noon and go to bed around 5:30pm. All of that is 'zulu' time and you just convert by adding 4 and a half hours to zulu time but it can be a little disconcerting for awhile. My biggest problem is that I say 'good morning' to everyone until it gets dark out.

Rarely someone will give something in local time instead of zulu. Everyone stops talking and you can see them converting to zulu time in their head so that it makes sense. If you told me you were going to eat dinner at 7pm I'm looking at you like you were nuts because 7pm to me is really 11:30pm. Got it? Don't worry, it took us a couple of days to get the hang of it too.

The last big adjustment I've had to make here is getting used to carrying a loaded M-16 with me everywhere I go. I sleep with it next to me, bring it to the chow hall, the gym, sometimes even the bathroom. It's like my new best buddy. Of course, everyone on Bagram has a fully loaded new best buddy. Let's just hope my buddy isn't a 'fair weather friend'.

By the way, the time difference between Bagram and the East Coast of the US is 8 and one half hour.

Finally, a bit of information that should make my mom very happy. Since I've been here I've had to stop being a vegetarian. There's just no way I could stay healthy and do it. I must say though, it doesn't seem like I was missing much. Steak, pork and chicken doesn't taste as good as I remembered. Maybe that's just the cooking though....

July 03

I was tasked to pull security for a team that was trying to arrange the purchase of some weapons from a seedy Afghan dude. We met the guy twice that day. The first time he had a truckload of anti-tank missiles for sale. Once we met him we went to someplace secure so that our bomb

guys could inspect the goods. While we were driving there, we had vehicles in front of and behind this guy. I was in the vehicle directly behind the missile laden truck and I had a feeling that we were a little too close to this thing. Now, I didn't know too much about this stuff but I was thinking "If this guy has a bomb buried in there or if he hits a really big bump, I'm a goner." I found out later that was a bit of an overstatement but hey, I was new to the place and after all....how exciting would this story be if I said "It would have taken a small nuclear explosion to detonate the stuff in his truck and if one of those went off nearby I think I'd have bigger problems than the stuff in this dude's truck."

Fortunately, the guy with the goods wasn't in any hurry to meet Allah and just wanted some cash. The good news for us is that most 'bad guys' in Afghanistan are similarly motivated. It seems some cold cash in hand is usually more preferably to the promise of 72 virgins in the afterlife.

So, after we got control of this load of missiles, this guy figures he's got a first class ticket on the gravy train so he offers us a chance to buy an anti-aircraft missile. Now, anti-aircraft missiles are kind of a big deal because way back when the Soviets were here the good ol' U.S. of A. gave these guys a bunch of them to shoot down commie planes. The bad news is, some people think there are still some of these things out there and everyone thinks it would be incredibly bad if someone managed to shoot down an American plane with a missile we gave to these yahoos. As a result every local goof ball with a pop gun equates getting one of these missiles and selling it to the Americans with hitting the lotto.

Off we go to meet this guy in a big, open, empty area. It was like that scene from North by Northwest (Go ahead and rent the movie so you'll know what I'm talking about.

It's a great flick anyway so you won't be sorry and then I also won't have wasted this reference. And don't just say you're going to see it. Go out now! I'll wait until you get back from Blockbuster.....) where Carry Grant is waiting by the side of the road to meet some secret agent. Of course, that also where he gets attacked by a crop dusting pilot who was apparently suffering from some severe 'air rage' so the omens were to favorable for me. On a positive note, there's nothing growing in Afghanistan so a crop duster would look really out of place.

So were standing in the middle of nowhere by the side of this road while the missile dude is digging out his goods when I see a van packed with people (and I mean packed. In Afghanistan they'll cram as many people as possible in a car so long as there's some air to breath. I've seen people crammed between the driver and his door before. I guess that's like a driver's air bag for these people. 'Upon impact, your Hajii will deploy absorbing the brunt of the impact. The car manufacturer will not be responsible for any staining of your clothing as a result of damage to your Hajii in the crash.' While you're cramming people into the car the locals also continuously insist that they're very comfortable and that, yes, there is plenty of room for them and, in fact, their three brothers and uncle who's visiting from Qandahar.) I immediately get paranoid. After all, we were nowhere. Why would anyone want to drive along this road towards us. The words 'Uh-oh' flashed through my mind (I'm not that profound when I'm nervous) and I fingered the safety catch on my M-16. I looked around and realized that there wasn't anything around that could provide me with any sort of cover from whatever these bozos might decide to lob or fire at me. Things seemed to be going from bad to worse.

Are you sitting on the edge of your seat yet?

Well, unknown to me, the area where we were was a regular (in infrequently used) route for people traveling from this one, hole-in-the-wall village to another. As the van passed us by the smiling hordes of people shot nothing more sinister than a smile and a wave (at least those who had enough room to move their arms).

Whew.....Chalk one up for an over active imagination.

## **Afghanistan Update #2**

**12 Jul 03**



**A friend might well be reckoned the masterpiece of nature.**

**Ralph Waldo Emerson(1803 - 1882)**

As I'm writing this I'm taking my friend home. Usually, when someone says that it's no big deal. Maybe your friend's car is broken down or they had too much to drink,

whatever. This time, however, the phrase takes on a much more somber and significant meaning. Three days ago, my friend, Chris Geiger, died while we were both serving here in Afghanistan. I was one of three people given the honor of making sure he gets home.

I wish I could say that Geiger (I never called him Chris. I'm so bad with names I think one reason why I stay in the army is that it's just easier to read people's name tags rather than remember names) and I were life long friends and that we grew up together. I only knew him for four years, but in that time we grew very close. We shared many similar experiences in our military careers, both joining in the 1980s, serving in Germany during the end of the Cold War, and then, after leaving military service to attend college, we returned to the army in the National Guard. It was these shared experiences that built the foundation of our friendship.

For a lot of people the military is a way to pay for college or learn a skill, but for both of us it was a way of life we both loved and a way for us to serve a country which had given us so many opportunities. We also viewed ourselves as carrying out the tradition of professional soldiering that stretches back thousands of years. We felt that a responsibility had been passed onto us to embody all of the positive traits of military service that had evolved since the time of the Roman legions. It was our goal to not to dishonor all of those brave soldiers who went before us, defending what they believed in.

Most people in the unit thought of us as a modern day Abbott and Costello. Never taking life too seriously and always laughing louder than everyone else. When we would sit and talk together, however, our conversations would revolve around questions of honor, destiny and



duty. Words that most people say with a cynical sneer or in an alcohol induced state of false patriotism, we would turn over in our thoughts for hours, working them as a jeweler cuts a diamond. They were heavy, but welcome loads that we gladly shouldered so that we could take part in something bigger than our individual selves. We shared our fears of measuring up to the standards we set for ourselves as soldiers and both dreaded and anticipated the opportunity to prove ourselves both in our own eyes as well as those with whom we served.

I was proud of my friendship with Geiger and would brag about it to others at almost every opportunity. One of the things I appreciated most about him was our ability to disagree strongly about certain things and yet never let that affect the bond that had formed between us. Even though virtually every discussion we had about politics, the military or the environment would result in him calling me a communist and me calling him a fascist, in the blink of an eye we would be conspiring to commit our next big scheme.

We flew from Bagram to Uzbekistan (where some of our soldiers stationed there were able to pay their last respects) to Ramstein, Germany to Bangor, Maine and finally to Dover, Delaware. Geiger and one of the soldiers on the escort detail (a very old friend of his) stayed behind in Germany for a day or two.

On my flight back to the states, there are two coffins of soldiers who are also going home. One holds a marine who died in Kuwait. He was on his way to come home and in his rush, flipped his vehicle and died. I stared at that coffin for hours thinking of how much sorrow was created and what a waste just because this guy wouldn't take a few extra minutes to get to his destination.

The other coffin holds a soldier who was killed in an accident in Iraq. When we got on the plane I saw a female soldier sitting next to the coffin and, by the expression on her face (one I had seen too much of these past two days), I knew she was escorting the fallen soldier. Since she was alone, I introduced myself to her to see if she needed anything or wanted to talk. She told me that the soldier was in fact her 'battle buddy' (in the army, while we're supposed to look out for all soldiers, we're encouraged to partner up with someone so we can take care of and watch out for each other. It's alternately called a 'battle buddy' or a 'ranger buddy') and a mother of a one year old infant.

I told her that, unfortunately, I knew exactly how she felt and talked briefly about the friend I was escorting home. After, we sat together for a few moments in silence, just sharing our grief. What can you say that doesn't sound clichéd, cheap or inappropriate? We parted then with wishes of sympathy and luck, hoping that neither one of us would have to travel with a friend like this again.

In our countless talks, Geiger and I both acknowledged the possibility that we might not come back from a deployment. I was always very concerned that I serve on a mission that I believed in strongly. Geiger's faith in his country and the Army were so strong that almost by definition, the call to arms was enough to win his support. In either case, we both felt that we were at the right place at the right time for our destiny. His loss only strengthens my conviction that this mission must be accomplished. So many armies have come to Afghanistan to fight and die for prestige, money or power. Here, instead of laying our lives on the line so some robber-baron can line his pockets, we actually have the opportunity to make the lives of countless people better and in turn, the world safer for everyone. Rarely does the chance to do something so important come

up in a lifetime, and to Geiger's credit he accepted the challenge without hesitation.

My life is richer for having known Geiger and I've always considered it an honor and a privilege to have him judge me a friend. In addition to being a friend, he was also a great soldier. One who viewed his profession, even though only 'part-time' with a *gravitas* worthy of the most distinguished soldiers in history. I would have welcomed him with open arms to join me on any mission, anywhere.

I have lost both a comrade in arms as well as a close friend. He possesses my undying respect and admiration. I only hope these few, imperfect words can begin to convey the depth of my feelings for my dear friend.



**Rest in peace my friend.**

## **Afghanistan Update #3**

**19 Jul 03**

The locals here are referred to by us as "Hajji" (pronounced 'Ha-Gee'). At first I thought it was a derogatory term but later found out that it's almost a term of respect so it's OK to say in front of them. Of course your tone of voice can always make it a little less respectful.

About 2,000 Hajjis come on post every day to do work of some sort or another (construction, emptying porta-potties, trash, etc. etc. - basically all the stuff we don't want to do). They really do work like dogs and I've heard they get \$5 a day. What makes it worse for them is that the local warlords take a portion of that (I've heard \$2 or \$3) as 'protection money' when the workers leave post. If these guys have to travel any distance to get here (a number drive up from Kabul which is about an hour away) they can also expect to have to pay a 'toll' (Not like tolls we're familiar with. These are set up by local warlords and are basically just guys with AK-47s who stop cars on the road and charge a fee to let you pass. Obviously, that's just for the locals. We go where ever we want.).

Every Friday here there is a bazaar where Hajji from a number of local villages come to sell various goods. You can buy bootleg CDs and DVDs for \$4 a piece as well as handcrafted items, antique weapons, just about anything the Hajji can get there hands on and think Americans will buy (which is just about anything).



Hajjis going through the checkpoint in order to get on base and earn their \$5 per day.

The rules of the bazaar are that:

- 1) You've got to haggle
- 2) You can't want anything too bad

I've been to two or three of these things so far and mostly it's the same stuff every week. That means that the real entertainment to be had at these things is haggling over the stuff. It's quite the shock since we're all used to seeing a price at the store and having to pay that price. In Afghanistan, everything is negotiable. You have to walk that fine line of negotiation when at the bazaar. Offer too high of a price and you know you got snookered. Offer too low and you don't get your goods. You'll know when you got something at a decent price because the negotiations will be similar to passing a kidney stone. You'll spend 5 minutes trying to talk a guy down from a price of \$8 for something that you want to buy for \$7. You'll know when you got ripped off when you have a conversation like the one I had:

Me: How much is that? (pointing to some bauble or trinket)

Hajii: Twenty dollars.

Me: I'll give you ten.

Hajii: Ok. Ten dollars!

Me: Damn! I paid too much!

If the Hajji doesn't put up a fight and claim that he's not



Semi-controlled chaos. A view of the bazaar. Notice the helicopters in the background.

making money I don't feel like I'm getting my money's worth. If you're real savvy you can get vendors to compete against each

other if you don't mind doing the leg work. A lot of the stuff for sale is sold by numerous vendors and they all ask different prices. I was looking at bayonets, for example, and the first guy I talked to wanted \$25 for one (I talked him down to \$10). Not 30 feet away, another guy was

selling the same, exact thing for \$15 asking price. You've got to do your homework. It's like Ebay with M16s!

### **A funny thing happened on the way to the funeral**

Geiger's funeral was an extremely sorrowful and respectful event. But, the old boy must have been pulling some strings during this whole time just to keep me on my toes. A couple of things happened that I just have to mention because they practically screamed to be put in here.

First off, while we were stopped over in Germany I stopped off at a Subway for a hoagie. Since I was no longer in Afghanistan I decided to revert to my vegetarian ways (sorry Mom!) and I ordered a sub called a 'veggie delite'. Now, just by the name I'm sure you can guess what types of foods are and are not on this sandwich. So, I made my bread choice (country wheat or some yuppie sounding thing like that), my cheese choice.

Which wasn't really a choice. I wanted provolone, but the guy at the counter said "All we have is American". Great. We've got a great country but we've got a lousy cheese named after us. Say what you want about the Europeans but they can make a damn good cheese.

Uh oh...another sub-reference. I haven't had these in awhile. Don't worry, I'll get back to the whole point of the story eventually. The best thing to do when I ramble like this is just sit back and enjoy the ride. Quite frankly, I don't even know what I'm going to say next. It just comes out. Almost like I'm channeling some spirit entity. If I am though, I'd like to know why I couldn't channel somebody cool. No. I've got to get stuck with some weird spirit that's

just like your old uncle Ignatius who takes 45 minutes to tell you a 2 minute story about how he got cut off on the interstate back in 1954 by President Eisenhower's second cousin. During the course of that story, of course, he also ties in everyone he's ever met in his life as well as some embarrassing stories about your childhood (or was that your sister. I always get you two confused.) Well.....you get the point. Where was I? Oh, yeah. The cheese.

The easy joke about the cheese (look up two paragraphs if you are wondering what the hell I'm talking about) would be to say 'the Europeans make a gouda cheese'. Get it? Gouda? Well, it's kind of a bad joke and not really worthy of this update which is why I didn't include it here except to note that it's not included here on purpose. Ok....back to the Subway.

So, I've got my bread and cheese lined up and the guy moves it over to the "fixin's" area, looks at me and says: "Do you want any vegetables on this?"

I was shocked. Did I hear him right? I ordered a 'veggie delite' sub and he's asking me if I want any veggies on it? I didn't answer for a moment since my brain was about to pop a circuit trying to figure out if this guy said what I thought he said. Then, I thought that maybe he asked me the question for a reason. Maybe you can get a veggie delite without veggies. Maybe there's another option. It didn't really seem like there was any wiggle room given that the 'veggie' is right in the title. I mean you couldn't put in fruit or that would be a 'fruity delite' which would not only be a totally different item on the menu but also probably not anything any straight guy would ever order anyway. I order so pretty non-manly stuff sometimes but even I would draw the line at actually saying "I'd like a 12 inch fruity delite to go."



Ok...so we can safely scratch fruit from the list of possibilities.

Then I remembered that everything is classified into animal, vegetable and mineral. Again, putting that 'veggie' in the title really narrows your choices (although minerals were probably never really that high on the list of possible sub toppings. 'Oh...could you put some extra limestone shavings on that with oregano?' ). So the classification thing wasn't helping either. By this time the guy is starting to look at me funny since I haven't answered (what appeared, at least to him) a very simple question. Do I want any damn veggies on this veggie hoagie? I decided quickly that there was no secret option that I didn't know about and this guy was just some sort of moron. So I got my veggies on my hoagie (I wonder if anyone ever ordered a veggie hoagie and asked to hold all the veggies. Maybe that's why they asked. Maybe, just maybe, some dude ordered one and this sub-maker dude tried to be fast and started putting veggies on without asking. Then, the dude who ordered the sub may have freaked out and said something like "If I wanted veggies on my sub I would have TOLD you! Now I want a new one. Where's your manager?!" Maybe the whole incident freaked out the guy who makes the subs so bad that he asks questions like this now. Or....maybe he's just a freak.)

The second thing that I found strange during this time actually occurred at the funeral parlor. While we were headed back to the armory after the first night of viewing one of the soldiers pulled out a shoe horn and said that he got it from the funeral parlor. A little investigation revealed that that this soldier (who wishes to remain anonymous) did in fact take a 'promotional' shoe horn from the place. The shoe horn, along with other items like key chains, calendars, etc. had the funeral parlor's name and

contact information printed on it. I have to admit, a shoe horn is a pretty strange place to put funeral information. I guess the only thing stranger would be someone who consults a shoe horn for funeral information.

I would love to meet the salesman who sold that stuff to the funeral home. I bet that guy could sell ice to an Eskimo. I'd just like to know his sales pitch. I mean....it's a shoe horn. How much funeral business can you drum up by giving away shoe horns?

I would go into greater detail about the type of person who takes shoe horns from funeral parlors but the individual in question outranks me. Let's just say it's probably a good thing shoe horns don't frequently come up in conversations.

Guy 1: 'Hey Bob. That's a beauty of a shoe horn. Whooooooweee. Can I take a look at that? Wow! Just check out the craftsmanship. Where'd you get it?'

Bob: 'A funeral parlor. Can you believe they were giving them away?!'

Guy1: 'Uh.....sure' (slowly backing away) 'Hey, I know I just got here but I remembered that I have to do something. Somewhere far away from here.' (guy1 quickly fades into the distant horizon)

### **Where are you from?**

Twice over the past few days I've been asked where I was from. For most people it's a pretty straight forward question. Where you're from is where you'll go back to once we're done playing army. Well, for me it's a bit more

difficult. I was born and raised in New Jersey, moved to PA about 9 years ago and just recently moved back to New Jersey. Now, in Pennsylvania, we still have a home that we use fairly frequently. On top of that, two days after arriving in Afghanistan, I got an email from my wife saying "I moved!". Her big mistake was giving me her new address.

So, when someone asks where I'm from do they mean originally, where I'm going to after mobilization or the nearest place I can call my own? Beats the hell out of me which means I have to ask for clarification when someone asks where I'm from. That usually elicits a response similar to the one I gave the guy from subway when he asked if I wanted any veggies on my veggie delite sub. It's like they want to slap me and say loudly and slowly....."WHERE.....ARE.....YOU.....FROM?" To which I answer..."Well, it depends....."I'm just telling people now that I'm from Bagram. Let them figure it out.

In fact, in the past week or so I've been asked where I'm from by three different reporters. In every case I've managed to sound like an idiot. I manage the first question (How do you spell your last name?) just fine but my inability to answer the 'Where are you from?' question convinces them that they would have to work way too hard to squeeze a coherent thought out of me and they beat a hasty retreat. Oh well, I guess I'm just not going to get my fifteen minutes.

### **Freedom of Speech???**

One thing that was really nice about coming home was that a number of people said they had been reading my updates and enjoyed them. Now, our First Sergeant will actually life stuff from my updates and put them in our company newsletter. I was a little nervous at first because I try not to

censor myself and occasionally will say something political or describe some boneheaded decision by the powers that be. But, the First Sergeant assured me that he'd keep an eye out for anything to 'controversial' and edit it out.

Well, while we were in Ft. Dix I had mentioned something to the effect that a lot of us were swilling vast quantities of booze on a regular basis. Apparently some people caught some hell for that at home. I guess that plus some other stuff I wrote got people a little edgy and it was recommended to me that I not submit anything anymore unless it was properly 'screened' by some officer. Fortunately, I said that I never submitted anything in the first place. I just post it to my website or email to friends for their personal pleasure (or torture depending how you look at it) and it somehow works it's way to the newsletter.

So I'm just going to keep going with these updates and read 'em if you like 'em. Trash 'em if you don't. I do have a couple of ground rules that I do set for myself on this though. First, I don't use names of anyone regardless of if I'm talking good or ill of them. This whole thing is really about me (and after all, the universe does revolve around me doesn't it?) and my observations. Other people come into play only as far as they impact upon me and I like to keep them in the background (that way they don't steal my limelight). Secondly, I'm not into spreading rumors about people. There's too much of that going on anyway and it's bad karma.

Also, if you are reading this in the newsletter (assuming it doesn't get edited out), you're reading a 'sanitized' version. The complete version can be read (usually) at [www.ssgbaratta.com](http://www.ssgbaratta.com). Check it out if you have some time to kill. You'll find out more about me than you've ever wanted to know.

That's it for this time....

### **Jul 03**

The base commander makes frequent visits to people and villages in our area. Sometimes these visits are 'business' (like when discussing security with a local warlord or upcoming construction projects with village elders) and sometimes they're strictly 'PR' (like attending school openings, bridge dedications or lunch with some local bigwig).

This time we were doing a little bit of both. The commander was getting ready to leave Afghanistan and was making his rounds so that he could say goodbye to the local warlords he was worked with and tie up any loose ends before he left. The area we went to was the very definition of 'remote'. I mean, like 'middle of nowhere' remote. I mean, like you can't get anywhere from there remote.

It was a two hour drive along gravel paths (almost all the roads here are gravel or dirt. The major 'highways' here that are paved consist of one lane going each way.) up into a mountain range. Some of the roads were barely wide enough for a car to drive on them and frequently when they were that narrow, there would be a vertical mountainside climbing up on one side and a straight drop down a few hundred feet on the other. Thank god I wasn't driving or they still wouldn't have gotten my white knuckled fingers pried off the steering wheel.

The warlord who was hosting this little shin-dig wanted to make sure we wouldn't have any trouble on our way to his place so he posted armed soldiers all along the route. I use the term 'soldier' in the loosest possible sense. Here in Afghanistan, if you can pull a trigger and you have access



A lone Afghan soldier stands guard on our route.

to an AK-47, you're a soldier. Training, uniforms, discipline and everything else is very optional.

Once we got to the village all of our officers went with the locals for lunch and speeches. I had the relatively boring task of guarding our vehicles with a few other soldiers. It was during this time that I became intimately acquainted with 'body armor'. The armor we wear isn't like the bullet proof vests you see the police wearing on 'Cops'. These things are designed to stop much bigger bullets. As a result of all this extra protection (and the fact that this since this is a military product, I'm sure the Pentagon included 'discomfort' in the specifications they gave the contractor that makes these things) these things feel like they weigh a ton and (at least in the summer) act like your own personal

sauna. You absolutely bake in these things. Stand around in one of these things for a couple of hours in 100 degree heat with a Kevlar helmet and assorted gear and even Gandhi would have gotten a little cranky.

To take our minds off of our lack of comfort we had a gaggle of local kids to keep us occupied. It's really a big event for the locals when soldiers are around so the kids swarm like sharks smelling blood. They all ask for stuff (food, water, pens, anything they happen to see hanging off your uniform), try to sell you stuff (flashlights that don't work, coins, other junk), practice their English (the first words they learn always seem to be either 'Hey mister' or 'How are you', both said as if it was one word) or just try to distract us.

If the kids get too close, either to us or the vehicles, usually an Afghan soldier would chase them away. They learn quickly that we won't hurt them so they're slow to back away when we yell at them. Even when the locals shoo them away, they'll usually start creeping back around within minutes. Usually, the kids aren't a problem but like I said, when you're in the full regalia of military gear you aren't exactly the happiest, most carefree person around the endless chant of 'Hey, hey, hey' from 50 kids all trying to get your attention starts to wear on you.

### **5 Aug 03**

Well, I'm back in Afghanistan which means that my updates will be coming in this format from now on. I'm not sure how good this update is but I wanted to get something out since some of the stuff is more than a week old. Besides, they can't all be winners.....

On our way back to Afghanistan, we stopped off at an air

base in Kyrgyzstan (I think that's how you spell it). While there isn't much to do at Bagram, it's a thriving metropolis compared to Kyrgyzstan.

Having little else to do, I decided to get my hair cut (but not right away....I wanted to make sure I paced myself since I didn't know how long I was going to be there and I didn't want to do all the exciting things at one time). Now I had heard that on this base the women who cut your hair also do this scalp massage that was supposed to feel amazing. So, admittedly, I had some ulterior motives in going to the barber shop. I had to see if this was an urban legend or not.

To be fair though, I also just wanted to be able to postpone having to get my hair cut at Bagram. The people who cut your hair here are really surly types and their lack of English is matched only by their inability to actually cut hair in anything remotely resembling a style. If you aren't getting all the hair on your head shaved off you're really pushing your luck. In fact I just got my hair cut here and as soon as I sat in the chair the lady looked at me and said: "Skinned?"

To which I replied: "Absolutely not!" I have no intention of going bald before I have to. You know how the NRA's slogan is "The only way you'll take my gun is to pry it from my cold, dead hands"? Well, I'll have to be in the same condition before I let anyone scalp me.

Anyway, as I was walking into the barber's tent, the atmosphere made me uneasy right away. Foreign pop music was playing out of some tinny speakers while customers were waiting on old, second hand furniture, fidgeting with months old magazines waiting for their turn.



When one of the haircutters is ready, she comes around to the waiting area to lead the new victim to a chair. One nice thing of note was that they had an interpreter there to explain what kind of cut the person wanted. I'm not sure I got what I asked for but at least I felt like I had a fighting chance. The haircut went quickly (by this point, there isn't too much to cut) and as I was about to get up and pay, the lady looks at me and says "Wash?" Ah....here's my chance. The famous 'scalp massage'!

I agree and almost immediately regret my decision. The lady leads me into a backroom, separated from the rest of the tent by a curtain. I'm really starting to feel like I'm getting involved in something here that I don't want to. The whole thing is just starting to make me feel dirty which is kind of ironic since the whole purpose is to get clean.

So....I'm lying back in this chair with my head over a sink, my body tensed to jump out of the chair and head for the hills if she asks me if I want a 'happy ending' to my wash. Then she starts running water over my head and running her fingers through my hair. Now, when I wash my hair the whole procedure (rinse, lather, wash, repeat) takes about two minutes. The woman was rubbing my head like I was Elvis or something for what seemed to be 2 months. Then, out comes the shampoo and you'd think my head was the size of one of the Mt. Rushmore presidents given the amount of time she took lathering it up.

The whole thing was just really freaky. I know I should have enjoyed it but I just kept having visions of being caught by some hidden camera expose: "Tonight on 60 Minutes....Soldiers engaging in shameful hair washing!" I was really freaked out by the whole thing. I think I'll just wash my own hair from now on. Who knew you could feel cheap and sleazy getting your hair washed?

## **The Italian Connection**

On Bagram there are representatives from a bunch of different countries. Germans, Danes, Koreans, British, and (among others) Italians. The Italians are renowned for having the best food on post but everyone can't just walk in like our mess halls. You either have to go to their gate and 'sign in' (hoping that they haven't let too many others in already in which case you'll have come back another time) or get invited in. Now, I'll let you guess who gets invited to the compound but let me give you a little hint first:

There are about 7,000 men on Bagram.

And about 700 females.

Take away the married, lame and lesbians and you've got a very, very small pool of available women.

So needless to say the Italians are always trolling around to bring women back to their compound for food. It's like a bad 50s 'B' movie:

"Italy needs women!"

See! The greasy hair!  
Taste! The garlic in the pasta!  
Hear! The bad accent!  
Smell! The poor hygiene!

In all fairness I guess I have to say that I'm just jealous. Give me another month or so of this army food and even I might put on a skirt for a good meal.

Just so long as none of them ask me to dance....

## **The Ramen King**

Just to give you an idea of how low I've sunk when it comes to food I'll tell you a little story. When I got back last week they opened up the mess hall for lunch. They don't serve full meals but you can get lunch meat and Cup O' Noodles soup. Now, getting to eat those ramen noodles is the high point of my day. You should know that Ramen noodles and I go way back. When I was about 20, I was shopping and I came across these Ramen noodles and they were only .20 each. That's when I had a major epiphany that comes along only once or so in your life (if you're lucky). I figured I could eat only Ramen noodles and spend only \$3 per week on food thereby allowing me to save huge amounts of cash! It seemed like a brilliant idea at the time and I was doubly impressed with myself because I didn't think anyone else had ever thought of it. Now, I realize that other people probably had come up with the idea but were too embarrassed to say. I gave it the old college try but after two weeks of eating Ramen noodles three times a day, the mere sight of those noodles would turn my stomach. I don't think I've eaten them since.

I guess either enough time's gone by that my stomach doesn't remember the noodles or I'm just so tired of the pre-packaged army stuff we were eating for lunch that my body picked the lesser of two evils and went with the noodles.

## **How long are you going to wear that?**

Being in the army leads many people to take up a habit they wouldn't dream of while in the civilian world. It's not uncommon for us to wear the same uniform 4, 5, or even 6 days in a row. That's right. Read it again just in case you missed it. There's no stigma in doing that either. People

who wouldn't dream about wearing the same outfit twice in the same month back home are wearing the same clothes until they practically walk themselves to work.

Even I, dear reader, will wear a uniform for many days before changing. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, we (or at least I do, I can't vouch for anyone else) change our undergarments all the time and they're the ones that accumulate most of the funkiness. Secondly, I've got so much crap on my belt or in my pockets I'm just too damn lazy to transfer it to another uniform. And finally, who the hell do I have to impress? So long as I don't offend people working right next to me I'm OK.

Besides, unless you really smell, no one can tell if you've changed your uniform or not because you wear the same thing every day. Some people have a system for knowing when to change like every Sunday. It works out pretty well since they can usually get into a new uniform before they get too smelly.

I don't have a system like that.

As a result I often forget how long I've worn my uniform. My method of knowing when to change my uniform is when the camouflage pattern on my clothes is broken up by all the food stains I've acquired.

Just one final vignette. The only newspaper we have access to is the Stars and Stripes. Unfortunately, for some reason everything we get is a couple of weeks old. I was excited to get a newspaper that was only 7 days old. Hey, if I'm getting news in the same week that it happened I feel like I'm well informed.

That's all I can think of for now,

**Aug 03**

Hope you enjoy this one.....

While we were in Ft. Dix, we received word that we would have an 'embedded' reporter assigned to our unit. The plan was for her to focus on the individual soldiers and tell our stories. She came from local paper so it was envisioned to have fairly wide appeal.

For those of you not in the Allentown area, you can check out the stories on line at [www.mcall.com](http://www.mcall.com) but I wouldn't recommend it. A quick scan of her stories would reveal that she didn't mention any of the things I considered important enough to write about and let's face it, how good of a reporter could she be if she didn't even write one feature about me? I'm the most interesting thing to his this country since Alexander the Great. What does she write about instead? The heat, our mission and a rocket attack. What kind of no-talent hack writes about that? Where's the hard hitting journalism? Where's the street wise reporter keeping the people informed and the public officials in check? Where's the special Sunday supplement with a full color poster of me? Hey! I want my 15 minutes of fame too!

A really good reporter would have chomped at the bit to write a story like this....

**Bagram, Afghanistan** - The dusty, sun bleached plains of Afghanistan have taken many unsuspecting soldiers by surprise throughout history and today was no exception. SSG Dean, a U.S. soldier stationed in Bagram for

Operation Enduring Freedom, was shocked to his core to find a flush toilet facility within a five minute walk of his tent.

"I was just walking around, minding my own business, when I saw this tan container. There was a sign on the door which said 'Latrine' but it didn't really make sense because I've learned here that the only latrines we have are porta-potties. So, I opened the door and that's all I really remember."

The military police report that SSG Dean was found some time later hugging the porcelain toilet in a death grip while constantly flushing it and murmuring "Yessssss, my preciousssss, yessssss." It took more than two cans of pepper spray and three burly MPs to dislodge him from the commode. Currently, SSG Dean is being held at a local hospital for observation. Doctors say this frightening display is unfortunately becoming all too common among soldiers deployed overseas. The medical community has identified this syndrome as T.D.D. or Toilet Deficient Disorder. The Rolling Stones and Justine Timberlake are reportedly considering a benefit concert.

Now that's a news story!

The latrine mentioned above is really interesting because it's co-ed. I don't think it was intended to be co-ed because the sign on the door says 'Male Latrine' but I think some females held a revolt and started going in there after someone printed out a sign that said 'Co-ed Latrine'. The sign is no longer up but the habit is already in place. You never know who you're going to bump into while you're there. It is a bit disturbing however. I've tried to maintain the illusion that chicks don't actually do 'number 2'. Part of me knows it's not true but as long as I don't see it I have

plausible deniability. I could keep using the porta-potties which would help maintain my illusion but I really dig flush toilets.

I've been writing about my experiences for over a year now and I have to admit that I'm more than a little confused. I was sure that by now I'd have at least a book contract and a couple of movie deals in the works (of course I'd have to play myself. The leading actors of today really just don't have what it takes to portray me correctly. My mix of brains, personality and swarthy good looks - along with genuine humility - just don't occur frequently and difficult to capture by actors who don't actually possess those talents). And what about the tons of letters and emails from the thousands of adoring chicks (accompanied of course with revealing photographs).

---NOTE TO MRS. DEAN: Please ignore the previous sentence ---

I mean.....what the hell is going on here?

Hmmmm.....well, I am on the army email system. Maybe the government is filtering all commercial activity (as not appropriate on a U.S. government computer. That would account for me not getting all those lucrative book and movie offers) and mail that might be deemed 'pornographic' (just because they don't want anyone to have any fun).

Yeah.....that MUST be it.

(Before you all jump to email me and point out how delusional I'm being, remember....

1. I'm living in Afghanistan for six months
2. I'm living in a tent with 5 guys
3. My biggest thrill in the past month has been to use a

flush toilet

In other words, "Throw me a damn bone and don't burst my bubble!")

Ok...on with the update

The showers we have are pretty good. We actually get our own shower stalls (versus one big room and six shower heads like in Ft. Dix) but the stalls are right next to each other so I'm discovering that people really don't know how civilized human beings are supposed to practice personal hygiene.

I thought I had mentioned this in an earlier email but apparently some people out there either didn't pay attention or forgot so I'm going to have to write a few words about proper behavior while in the shower.

Rule #1: It is not OK to blow your nose or hack up a loogie in the shower.

It's just gross. If your stuffed up, blow your horn before you get in the shower or wait until you get out. It's never appropriate to cough up a lung cookie unless you've got pneumonia. I've managed to avoid doing it for almost 35 years now. If I can do it so can you.

Besides, trust me guys, no chick has ever heard a guy spew boogers all over a shower and say "Ohhh....That's hot. If he keeps that up he'll get lucky tonight!" Don't get into the habit now and you won't have to break it later.

Rule #2: It is not OK to urinate in the shower.

I can't believe that adults actually have to be told this. The common argument for it is "Hey....the water washes it away so the shower is clean." That's fine. Let me take a dump on your dinner plate and put it in the dishwasher.



The minute you eat a meal off that plate is when you can take a wizz in the shower. Until then, use the toilet like human being.

Whew....That's it for now. Take it easy,

### **Aug 03**

A pilot was out flying around and reported what appeared to be rockets lying relatively close to the base. Now, reports of rockets get everyone all wound up because that's really the best and easiest way for the enemy to attack us. They usually can't hit us but it's the easiest way for them to shake their collective fist at us and let us know that they're still around. So, it was decided to send a few people out to see what the deal was with these things. Somehow I got included in this little group and found myself rolling out the gate.

I should say here that there are all sorts of explosives and weapons lying around Afghanistan. This country is one big military surplus store. Even broken down military junk gets used. Auto thieves and chop shop experts in the states are complete amateurs compared to what Afghans do here. I've seen tanks, jeeps and all sorts of armored vehicles reduced to bare metal husks with nothing removable left on them. They're like the native Americans who used all the parts of the buffalo that they hunted.

Anyway, I mention this because when this happened we hadn't been here long enough to put that bit of information into perspective. As a result we went directly into 'freak-out' mode every time we heard the word 'rocket' (and some people never got over that, much to my annoyance). By the end of the third month in country we practically had

to have a report saying they saw someone writing ‘Bagram or Bust’ on the side of the rocket and lighting the fuse before we’d start getting worried.

So we packed off in our vehicles to find this group of ‘rockets’. When we got relatively close we stopped to get some information from some nomadic tribesmen called ‘Kuchis’ These guys travel all over Afghanistan following their flocks of goats and camels. Our interpreter asked one guy about the rockets and he started leading us off the road and up this hill like he knew what he was doing. Now, one of the first things we were told when we got into Afghanistan was:

**“NEVER, EVER LEAVE THE ROAD!”**

Afghanistan, you see, is the most heavily land-mined country in the world and the area where we are is the most heavily mined area of Afghanistan. So.....when you get off the road you’re probably not making the most sound decision of your life. They even have traffic signs posted alongside some roads that say “Don’t pull off to the shoulder of the road - Land mines might be buried there!”

My first thought then, when this guy took off was ‘Is this guy crazy? Does he actually think we’re such morons that we’ll actually follow him?’

Apparently he did.

And apparently we were.

So, of course, we went right off the road and followed this guy. Hey, he *looked* like he knew where he was going.

Then, I remembered the second thing we were told when we got here:

“If you do leave the road, make sure you walk in areas other people have already walked.”

Now, these Kuchi people and their flocks have traveled all over that area so it seemed ‘relatively’ safe. After all, since these people have to travel through this stuff, the ones that are still alive (or at least have all their limbs) must have figured out where they can walk. Or, they’ve just been really lucky. At that moment I preferred to believe in the former explanation since I was following him.

When I got to the top of this little hill, the first thing that caught my eye was a small stack of round plastic objects. It took a moment for my brain to register that I was looking at a bunch of anti-personnel mines.

Uh oh.....definitely NOT a good sign.

The words ‘Ho-ley Shit’ popped into my mind (like I said earlier, I’m not the most profound person around when I get nervous) as I stared at these little ornaments of destruction.

Then someone got the bright idea to ask our guide about the area and if it was clear of mines (in retrospect, perhaps it would have been better to ask before we left the road). This guy then tells us that he and his fellows dug up this group of mines but that they’re all over the place around here. In fact, we went on to tell us, his uncle stepped on a mine **earlier that day and died!!**

I know I said it before but it seemed appropriate to repeat myself here:

“Ho-ley Shit!”

After talking to this guy for a few minutes and trying to figure out how to get off the freaking hill and back to the safety of our vehicles we see a group of kids tearing up the hill towards us. Like I’ve written earlier, we’re BIG entertainment to the locals, especially the kids. The hilltop was already crowded between all of us, our guide and the landmines. The last thing we wanted around pressure sensitive explosives was a bunch of hyperactive kids. But, in a flash they were on top of the hill with us.

I was expecting to hear (or feel) a big “BOOM” any second.

The kids didn’t seem overly concerned by the mines at all, although they clearly know what they were. Maybe they had just seen so many in their lives they weren’t phased by them but it was quite a bizarre experience to see kids goofing around a foot or two away from the mines. We, however, were not nearly so complacent about the situation and chased them off the hilltop a number of times (who knows if that was the right thing to do. At least we could all see the mines on the hilltop. We had NO idea what else was out there.). The kids would scurry away for a few minutes but as soon as we focused on something else they’d start creeping back up to the hill.

After a little bit of this even the bomb disposal guys were starting to get a little nervous that one of the kids would accidentally set one of the mines off and really ruin our day. Now, if the guys who defuse bombs for a living are nervous, I’m nervous.

“Ho-ley Shit”

So the long and short of it was that we couldn't find these stupid rockets. But, our guide told us he knew where there were all sorts of weapons laying around and he'd be glad to show us the way. I'm not sure why but at the time this sounded like a good idea so we walked back to our vehicles (as gingerly as possible) and had this guy take us to this place. I wouldn't have thought it possible but the second place this knucklehead took us to was even worse than the first. While I didn't see any piles of landmines around there was plenty of unexploded ordinance on the ground and (my highly analytical, if poorly timed mind added), every pile of mines I don't see is just more that might be buried around waiting for my 10 ½ boot to step on it.

After a few, short minutes of looking at this moonscape we wisely decided that there was 'NO F'ING WAY!' we were going to take a hike in there. If Bin Laden was hiding rockets in there, let him blow his foot off trying to recover them.

Whew....

So we ended the day without any rockets but with all the appendages we started out with so it worked out just fine for me.

Aug 03

We received a report of an artillery piece and an anti-aircraft gun within a few miles of our base. We weren't positive if they were a threat or not, but we really didn't want to take any chances. Our base commander had a meeting with the local warlord in charge of that area and he said "Sure, go ahead and disable those guns." So, that's what we decided to do.

A group of us traveled out to destroy these guns. I'm not sure how I got included in the group but to be honest, I'm not sure how I got included on most of these little trips. Oh well, it sounded like it could be interesting. The best part was, since we wanted to have a low profile we would be allowed to wear civilian clothes. I had a Hawaiian shirt just perfect for the occasion. I'm not sure how low a profile I made but I looked cool, and after all, isn't that really more important? We were told that these guns were just a 'short walk' from the road and it shouldn't be a big deal.

There was a large village near the site where we parked our vehicles and some of our group took up positions to secure them. Of all the things you can do outside of the wire in Afghanistan, my opinion is that vehicle security is the worst. All you do is stand there all day and try to keep people from stealing stuff from inside your vehicles while you're surrounded by dozens of villagers who are standing there watching you like you're more interesting than the new Victoria's Secret catalog. Inevitably, you have to go to the bathroom at some point but you can't go because if you do a whole crowd of people are going to see your wiener. We really have got to get these people some TVs. Four locals volunteered to be our guides and off we went.

Like I said, we were there to 'disable' those guns. To us, that means 'blow them up' so that they can't ever be used again. The explosives guys brought a bunch of plastic explosives with them to do the job. Since it was going to be a bit of a hike, we all took some to split the weight up. So there I was.....in Afghanistan carrying a loaded M-16, four sticks of plastic explosive, a flak vest and wearing a Hawaiian shirt. How the hell did I end up here?

Most homes in Afghanistan are actually walled compounds. I don't know if they do it for security or to

clearly define their property ('Muhammad, that rock belongs to me.') but it seems that everyone has a 7 or 8 foot high mud brick wall surrounding their property. While that may make the people inside the compounds feel safer, it has the (possibly) unintended consequence of turning every 'street' (and I use 'street' in it's loosest possible sense) into an alley, ideally suited for an ambush. You have no idea who or what is on the other side of these walls. I could be a bunch of school kids or some nut with a grenade.

The other thing about these alleys is that there is rarely a good way to get out of them if something were to go wrong. With difficulty you might be able to hoist yourself up and over one of the compound walls (although you'd make a great target and it would probably be a slow affair loaded down with your flak jacket, weapon and other gear) but there's nothing to say you wouldn't end up somewhere worse. Generally, in these alleys you have two options: forward or back. Of course driving down these dirt paths is worse since there is no place to turn around and some places are so tight you couldn't open the door and get out if you needed to.

After leading us through the town for a few minutes I realized that I was totally disoriented in this maze of walls and two story buildings. People were staring at us as our group of 15 or 20, all in civilian clothes and armed to the teeth walked through their town. Some would come out and wave, others (especially the women and small children) would peer from windows or half-opened doorways. I tried to think back to my training (which, as I was doing this for real seemed wholly inadequate) and scan the area for where threats might come from and was soon overwhelmed. There were just too many windows, rooftops, walls and doorways that could conceal someone who wanted to ruin my day.

Within a few minutes we found ourselves on the other side of the village and the guides pointed to the top of this huge mountain. That's where the guns were. Nobody said anything about having to hike up a mountain to get to this site. It was supposed to be a relatively easy 15-20 minute walk, instead I was looking at one hell of a hike with a lot of gear weighing me down. But, everyone else was in the same boat as me so up we went.

Now, our post on Bagram is a little over 4,000 feet above sea level which is much, much higher than just about anywhere in New Jersey (otherwise known as the Land of Milk and Honey). I had some time, however, to get acclimated to the thinner air and had been working out regularly so I didn't expect to have too much difficulty getting up that hill. Unfortunately, the top of the mountain was well over 6,000 feet above sea level. It wasn't long before all of us were huffing and puffing, trying to get a little oxygen into our lungs. The higher up we got, the more frequently we had to stop in order to catch our breath and the longer it took to stop wheezing like 90 year old chain smokers and start moving again.

I have to admit that I had a bit of a complex being there. I was older than most of the guys there and this sort of mission wasn't exactly everyday fare for me so I wanted to make sure that I didn't hold up the group or the mission back. Therefore, I just kept trudging up that mountain while my legs and lungs were begging for a break. After what seemed like an eternity, I saw the summit and realized that there was only one guy ahead of me. The rest of the group was strung out behind us. The guy (someone I hadn't worked with before) said to me: "The guides say this used to be an old Taliban stronghold. There's a tunnel system up there as well." I had stopped for a quick gulp of



air and he continued “C’mon, we’re too exposed here. Let’s get up here and clear this hilltop.”

So I push ahead to get to where he was waiting for me and I was thinking ‘Clear the hilltop? Who the hell does this guy think I am? I push papers for a living.’ When I came up even with him, he said “Ok, I’m going to that point there.” Pointing to an outcropping about 30 feet away. “Cover me and keep an eye out for any movement. I want to make sure nobody’s waiting up there for us. Once I’m there I’ll wave you up and we’ll leapfrog in.”

Cover him? What the hell was this, a bad TV movie? How the hell did I end up in my life with some guy telling me to ‘cover him’ so he didn’t get shot by the Taliban? At this point, part of me wanted to say: “Uh, excuse me, but I don’t think I’m really qualified to do this. Maybe you want to wait for a soldier or something.” But, another part of me told the first part to shut the hell up. If I didn’t want to do this stuff I shouldn’t have joined. Great, it looks like that was when I decided to channel the spirit of Patton. So, I quickly tried to remember every morsel of tactical information I’ve been taught since basic training and I went up that hill.

Now, in all fairness, the other guy really did almost all the work. I just followed him and covered him while he cleared the next position. And (fortunately for everyone involved) it ended up that there were no bad guys on top of that mountain. Even so, I felt like I had just let the charge up San Juan Hill or raised the flag over Iwo Jima.

Once we ‘secured’ the hilltop we set up security (from who, I have no idea) until the rest of the group arrived. Once they caught up to us we alternated between doing army stuff and playing tourist by taking pictures and

poking around the tunnels throughout the hilltop. The demolition guys were doing almost all of the work by that point, inspecting and collecting all of the ammunition they found at the site. There was stuff everywhere. I swear I saw one of the guides pluck a small rocket out of a tree like it was some kind of funky fruit.

After everything was collected together and the demolition guys were setting their explosives, our guides pointed to a small fenced off area about 20 feet from one of the guns and said that it was a gravesite for several 'martyrs' who had died either fighting the Soviets or the Taliban. Either way, it was very important to these people that our activities didn't destroy the graves. It almost sounded like the plot for some B movie. I figured that if we did any damage to the site, zombies would rise from the grave and take their horrible revenge upon us all.

Once the explosives team was ready we moved a safe distance down the mountain and waited while they made their final preparations. We didn't know exactly when they were going to blow the stuff up so we got comfortable (as comfortable as you can get with all that gear on and sitting on rocks) and relaxed a bit. After a few minutes, I just happened to look up the mountain to see if I could figure out what the hold up was and I saw this huge explosion. Now, it isn't like in the movies. When you view an explosion from a distance (which is really the best place to view them from) you see it well before you hear it. I guess if Hollywood did it like real life everyone would think the sound editor was smoking weed or something. Even knowing that however, when you see a big cloud of dust and debris and you hear nothing you get the feeling that something's just wrong, like god screwed up the universe's soundtrack for a few seconds.

Anyway, the explosion looked big. REALLY big. I thought about that gravesite and began resigning myself to a life on the run from angry zombies . I was sure there was no way that site had gotten away untouched. Fortunately I was wrong.

Please, everyone read that last sentence again. I know it's hard to believe but I was actually wrong AND I put it in writing. You might want to mark this day down in your calendars and remember right where you were when you read this because you'll probably want to tell it to your grandkids. Oh well....I guess I couldn't have expected to be right my whole life. And by some strange karmic coincidence, one of the officers in my unit was actually right about something, probably for the first time in his life (and my guess is, the last time as well). So, I guess there is balance in the universe.

Everything ended up fine, with the grave untouched but the guns totally unusable. It was time to get back into our vehicles, go to our base and kick back with a nice non-alcoholic cold one. It's O'Doules time.....

The 'road' out of town was, in fact, a dry river bed (who knows what these people do during the rainy season) which we were supposed to follow to a dirt road. One of the guys in our group noticed that we passed the turn off and once we turned around we understood why. A small wall of stones (maybe a foot high) was put up, camouflaging the turn off. It had to have been put up since we drove down that same path to get to the village we were in.

Uh oh.....

Everybody started getting a little suspicious. The locals seemed friendly enough, we were confident we weren't on

any zombie hit list. What the heck was going on? The explosives guys started checking the rock wall to make sure it wasn't booby trapped but we just decided to go around the thing. As we drove on further we came across another wall blocking our path. At this point we were getting a little wound up. Maybe these people liked us so much they didn't want us to leave? Somehow that didn't seem right. We couldn't figure out if people were just giving us a hard time or had some more nefarious motives but we really didn't want to hang around to find out. We started to get voice our displeasure to the locals through our interpreters and by displaying our 'pop guns' a little more visibly.

One local villager came out and said that local kids built the walls and they were just playing tricks. Who know's if that's true or not but by that time we were definitely displaying "I don't give a crap" behavior and told him to take the wall down. In minutes there were a couple of locals pulling the rocks away, leaving a space for our vehicles to get through and we got back to base without any more problems.

### **30 Aug 03**

A surprising amount of the work done on Bagram is done by civilian contractors. Most of the people doing the menial labor (trash collecting, cleaning the port-a-potties, kitchen, etc.) are local nationals making (by our standards) the slave wage of about \$5 per day. It should be kept in mind however that in this country that's actually a respectable wage and competition for jobs here on base is pretty fierce. That being said, the companies that hire and pay these people are making their profits off of the fact that they can get away with treating their workers in a manner that would be illegal in most countries throughout the world. I imagine that somewhere down the road, people

are going to remember how they were exploited and probably be pretty pissed. But don't worry, I'm sure Dick Cheney will have exercised his stock options in the company by then so his retirement fund will be safe.

Many of the 'higher end' and sensitive positions (management, power generation, food preparation, etc.) is carried out by Americans (or people from other countries) getting paid BIG, tax free bucks for the inconvenience of working in Afghanistan.

Anyway, when any vehicles leave post, regardless of if they're civilian or military, there are some rules that have to be followed for safety. I won't get into the specifics but one requirement is that you have a certain number of troops with rifles with every convoy. As a result, these contractors sometimes have to canvas units on post to see if they can supply soldiers when they have business to do outside of the post. I was asked to help a group of civilians who had to go to the Kabul Airport in order to pick up some new employees arriving from the states.

I hadn't been to Kabul before but had heard that it was definitely a sight not to be missed. Therefore, I jumped at the chance to go. Now, for the two months I had been in country by this point, the one message that had been drilled into our heads over and over again was how dangerous it was 'outside the wire'. Reports of terrorists, weapons, and imminent attacks were so common that they were beginning to fade into regular background noise. As a result, I was ready for anything. So much so that the civilians referred to me as the 'paranoid one'. Well, I still think that's a hell of a lot better than the 'dead one'.

I didn't get to see downtown Kabul on that trip (to my disappointment) but it was still an interesting ride. Traffic

laws are virtually non-existent. Since the country has been at war for almost 25 years, whoever has been in power has probably had more pressing concerns that if people should be allowed to make a right on red or not. Besides, traffic laws are kind of pointless if you don't have anyone to enforce them and the police that are here just aren't equipped to give out speeding tickets.

As a result, driving in Afghanistan is a Darwinian experience of survival of the fittest. Right of way is determined by:

- a) The size of your vehicle
- b) Your willingness to use your vehicle as a battering ram if need be
- c) Your ability to communicate 'b' above to drivers around you
- d) The amount of weaponry you and your passengers can flash when trying to 'explain' how other drivers should back off.

Kabul International Airport is yet another interesting experience. It's name is far too majestic for the squat, institutional style building that bares its name. The place screams 'third world' with every feeble attempt to look modern and Western. The runway is strewn with wrecks of planes destroyed from years of fighting or just disuse. Obviously, Afghanistan suffers from a lack of marketing professionals. Nothing instills confidence in business travelers like seeing gutted hulks of airplanes while taking off or landing. What's next? Featuring such hits as 'Airport' and 'Alive' as in flight movies?

Hmmmm....this country has a long way to go.

### **Sep 03**

Bagram Air Field is about an hours drive from Kabul, the nation's capital and is the focus of military activity in Afghanistan. Since Kabul is the nation's capital there's always a large amount of traffic going back and forth between the two places. There are two routes you can take to make the 45 minute journey. They have been dubbed (with a complete lack of flair or originality) the Old Kabul Road and the New Kabul Road.

The new road was built by the Soviets because all their convoys traveling on the old road were always getting ambushed. The old road runs through a number of villages and is overlooked by numerous hills which provide excellent opportunities to observe, attack and then stealthily withdrawal from convoys traveling along the road. After a few years of this sort of nonsense, the Soviets decided (with their affinity for overkill) to create a new road without the deficiencies of the old road. That meant a road that didn't go through any villages and was cleared of anything that could possibly afford bad guys a good spot to shoot at them.

This time out I was accompanying a group of MPs on what is called a 'presence patrol'. My job was to stop at the numerous police and militia outposts along the old road to gather information about the who was where and anything else I could dig up. These presence patrols are designed to do just what their name implies. They show everyone that the Americans are here and it would be a bad idea to mess with us. In order to make that message clear they go out in 'up-armored' Hummers. That means they've got armor plating all around, bullet proof windows and a gunner on

top with either a machine gun or something we call a 'Mark-19' which is essentially a machine gun that fires grenades instead of bullets. Add to that 4 to 6 other soldiers carrying a variety of weaponry and you've got quite a punch packed away.

These police and militia outposts aren't at all what we think of as police stations. Many of these are 'Gilligan Island' primitive. During the warmer months it's very common to see beds out in the open or perhaps under a tarp, along the side of the road. It looks like some sort of small hobo camp but, nope, it's the local police outpost. Basically there are two ways you can distinguish such an 'outpost' from a pile of discarded rubbish:

- 1) There will be an Afghan flag flying above the rubbish
- 2) There will be a couple of guys standing around with AK-47s

That was the criteria we used to figure out where to stop at. We'd see an outpost, look for a suitable spot alongside the road that looked safe to pull onto (which means find someplace that looks like someone else has parked there and not gone 'BOOM') and start to schmooze. Usually our visits were well received and these guys really looked like they were bored. That means once these guys get TV I'm sure they'll get much more surly and less cooperative since we won't be supplying entertainment to these guys any more. In terms of possessions, these guys have almost nothing except the clothes on their back, some cooking utensils, bedding and a couple of AK-47s that they share.



They don't even have radios to call for backup if they need help.

If something happens at these outposts and they need to contact their boss these guys have to fire their guns into the air in order to get his attention. Their boss, hopefully hearing the gunfire and knowing it came from his guys, will then go to the outpost. Although he won't know why he's going and what he'll need so it's certainly not the most efficient form of communication.

So when we'd see one of these outposts we'd pull over and go talk to these guys. We would always cause a stir since the majority of these people's day is taken up by sitting around watching traffic go by and maybe smoking some hash. It's such an event, in fact, that sometimes people will pull over, get out of their cars and join our little group just to see what's going on. Could you imagine doing that back in the states? Give it a shot. The next time you see a police officer giving someone a ticket along the road, pull over, get out and walk over to him. If he asks what you're doing just tell him you were bored and wanted to watch. I'm sure that'll go over real well. In Afghanistan, it's no big deal. It does get confusing because many of the police officers and militia guys don't have uniforms (the government can't afford them) so they wear civilian clothes. Add to that the fact that some of the 'curious commuters' love to talk and put in their two cents, even if they don't know what they're talking about and if you're not careful you'll have no idea who you're talking to.

The Afghan culture has a very strong tradition of hospitality. In fact, every time you meet these guys it's like going to your grandmothers house. They invite you (over and over) to have some tea, lunch, etc. It's a faux pas to decline under most circumstances and a refusal, no matter

how politely put, can easily be interpreted as an insult. This is a bit problematic since food preparation and good hygiene seem to be mutually exclusive terms here. I'm not even sure where to begin trying to elaborate on this point since there are so many examples but I'll try.

Meats are the biggest problems. There is no refrigeration here so once an animal is killed it needs to get into the cooking pot quickly before it starts to spoil. Vendors in the market hand their meat in open air stalls for the customers to browse. These stalls are right alongside the road so not only is the meat open to any passing bugs looking for a quick snack but it also manages to pick up all the dust that gets thrown up by passing traffic. There's nothing more appetizing than seeing a hunk of dirt encrusted meat swarming with bugs. Oh yeah! Now, that's only the problems you can see. Worms are also a significant problem with the meat here. Hoping that your friendly neighborhood hajji cook will cook your food sufficiently to kill any stow aways on the food is a crap shoot at best. That's why it's Army policy to de-worm soldiers returning to the states. I'm not exactly sure what's involved with that but it doesn't sound like fun.

The whole concept of washing your hands after things like going to the bathroom doesn't have a really strong hold on the population here either. I guess that's not too unusual since many people don't have access to clean water or indoor plumbing. Most people go to the bathroom 'where ever' (and I mean that literally, 'along the road, behind the house, anywhere). Sometimes there's a communal trench everyone uses (if they're close to it) but that's no guarantee. All I know is I haven't seen any toilet paper lying around. I'm not sure what (if anything) they use in it's place but the possibilities frighten me so I don't ask the

question. All I know is that I bring out the Purell hand sanitizer every, single time I shake hands with these guys.

Anyway.....

When Afghans invite me to lunch, all of these things run through my mind in an instant. Fortunately, I can't just leave all these MPs on the side of the road in the heat while I do lunch so I've got a good excuse to decline their offer. With profound apologies and an expression (I hope) is interpreted as regret (but really is tinged with more than a bit of relief) I decline their offers and we get back in our vehicles and go to the next checkpoint.

## **2 Sep 03**

There isn't a great deal to do here in order to kill time. We have a fairly well equipped gym, occasional access to computers (here, we're more fortunate than many other soldiers. Since we're in a headquarters, we tend to have much greater, albeit still limited, access to email and such. It's not uncommon for some soldiers to wait an hour or more for an opportunity to spend 30 minutes on a computer). Every night however, they do show a movie in one of the few buildings on the base and for a couple of hours you can sit in an air conditioned room (on some plastic lawn chairs) and munch on some free popcorn.

Now, I understand we're in a war zone and so don't expect to see top rate, first run movies. Some of the choices however, lead me to believe that the people in charge of the movies have been partaking in the fruits of the local horticulture.

For example....

For ten days in a row....TEN DAYS.....they showed nothing but westerns. I don't know if these guys were trying to kiss up to George 'dubya' in order to get a raise but I was starting to get a little torqued up. How many guys in ten gallon hats can you watch?

Then, we got a two day reprieve and they played 'Last of the Mohicians' (by far, the best movie they've shown since we've been here) and 'First Knight'. Now? Back to the damn westerns. Another western and I think I'm gonna snap.

One thing that is very unusual here is how quickly rumors spread here. I thought Ft. Dix was bad but I think that was just an opportunity to practice for the 'big game' here in Afghanistan. For some reason, once we got here, one of the biggest pastimes around became trying to see who could dish the most dirt on everyone else (regardless of its basis in fact). While most of this behavior is just pathetic there occasionally is some humor to it.

For example....

A few months ago a rumor started among the hajji villagers that there was this strange cat-like animal that was attacking people. The 'pisho palang' (it means 'tiger-cat' in the local lingo) was supposed to have killed a bunch of people and forced others to leave in panic. The best part of the story is that the US military is supposed to be behind this super-cat. These villagers actually believed that we were inserting killer cats in order to maintain order in the countryside. Read the story about it here:

[http://www.dailycamera.com/bdc/nation\\_world\\_news/artic](http://www.dailycamera.com/bdc/nation_world_news/artic)

[le/0,1713,BDC\\_2420\\_2173607,00.html](http://le/0,1713,BDC_2420_2173607,00.html)

It just seems a little weird that in our world of bio-weapons, napalm, and smart bombs these people think we need Felix the Cat hopped up on steroids to instill fear. If they had TVs, I'd say these people had watched one too many Oliver Stone movies or X-files episodes.

Don't assume that I'm making picking on the hajjis here. There have been dumber rumors spread by military personnel since I've been here but I don't think I'm allowed to write about them. I think I can sum them all up by saying that even though the US government spends billions of dollars to give us the 'best' in high tech communications. Internet, radio, satellite phones, etc. etc. etc. And yet, information is basically a big game of 'telephone' where the story changes with each retelling.

Yesterday, our unit had a meeting to discuss the overall climate here in Bagram. A survey had been handed out a couple of weeks ago and the results were presented. After listening to some of the comments I became convinced that at least some people have a really weak hold on reality. Let me sum up our situation as I see it:

- 1) We're in a war zone
- 2) The country we're living in is hovering somewhere around the 15th century. There is NOTHING here. There's nothing here as good as sliced bread because they don't have sliced bread!
- 3) We're in much better conditions than if we were in Iraq.

These three points really lead me to take an "I'm just happy to have a cot and hot meals" approach to life. After all, we could be in Baghdad and daily have to worry about snipers,

grenades, and rockets (oh my!) while sweating in full body armor and 130 degree heat.

Seems reasonable, right?

Apparently not.

People wanted T.V.s. People wanted refrigerators. People wanted a pool!

I guess people got the Club Med brochure mixed up with the "So, your going to war" government training aid.

At this point I thought the command should have just told everyone to shut their yaps and do their jobs (maybe it's just me but I'd feel a little guilty wallowing in a pool and knowing at that moment, not far away there were a bunch of guys carrying 60 lb packs through terrible terrain and heat risking their lives so I could be safe).

Then I heard the kicker.

The idea had been floated that people who were going to college might get to go home early so they wouldn't miss class.

I nearly had a stroke right there.

'What's the problem?' I hear you ask. 'Give them a break.'

Ah...glad you brought it up. Here's why I've got a problem....

1) They volunteered. They took the G.I. Bill, loan repayments, etc. when the going was good. This is the exact reason they got all that. If they didn't want to risk

getting mobilized and miss a semester of school they should have thought of alternative funding.

2) We're in the Army. I'm real sorry if this war is inconvenient but in the words of General Sherman "War is hell." Don't worry, we'll also make sure none of your loved ones are rude enough to die while your at school either. After all, the universe is here to serve you (I have to admit. This self-absorption goes beyond even my legendary levels!)

3) Everyone is important. Everyone has really good reasons to go home. Some people will miss their baby's first steps, words, etc. Some people will miss someone's last Christmas. Why is someone's college class more important than that?

4) They've got a job to do. So let's say we do send them home. Who's going to pick up their slack? So not only would they get to see their families early and restart their lives but us 'bottom feeders' get to do all their work too! What a deal!

The self-absorbed, spoiled brats in favor of this policy say 'Hey, you can go right back to your job. We'd have to wait a few months before we can get back into school. It's not fair.'

My answer is to read #1 through #4 again. If they still don't get it they're probably not bright enough to do well in college anyway and might as well stay here in Afghanistan.

Since I'm not in college I've come up with my own reasons, which I think are just as valid, for why I should go home early. Here they are:

- 1) It's Lobsterfest time at Red Lobster.
- 2) My dog is having a birthday party. I have to be the M.C.
- 3) A really cool episode of the Simpsons is on T.V.
- 4) I have season tickets to Muppets on Ice
- 5) My mom wrote me a note excusing me from the war
- 6) In enrolling in the Sally Struthers School of Lock Smithing and Home Computer Repair (letters of acceptance are available upon request).
- 7) I want to follow the rock band Phish around the country and smoke lots of dope. (I could smoke the dope here but Afghanistan doesn't have a real good live band scene).

I should say that I was really mad when I wrote this. I've since calmed down (it takes a little longer to do without alcohol). whew.....

Home on the Rangeski...

We have about contingents from 17 countries here in Afghanistan and every one has their own uniforms, equipment, etc. It's kind of interesting to check out everybody's stuff (which always seems better since its different). One of the things that attracts the most interest is the patches worn by the soldiers of the different units and countries. One of the countries here, Poland, has a really cool patch. They're an engineer unit that specializes in demining operations (clearing minefields) so there's an exploding mine along with a buffalo.



A what??

Yep...a buffalo. Even though it looks cool I do have to admit that buffalo isn't the first thing I think of when I hear the word 'Poland'. As a matter of fact it's barely the last thing I think of when I hear 'Poland'. I was about to chalk it up to just being Polish (and I'll remind you, gentle reader, that I'm half Polish) when I finally decided to ask one of the guys why the hell they had a buffalo on their patch. What did it mean?

Well....apparently there is an animal in Poland (called a 'zoob' I think) that resembles a buffalo. Who would have guessed? It's like the whole country of Poland has kept this animal a secret for some reason. I checked it out on the internet and couldn't find anything. I'm guessing it really is a buffalo on the patch and this guy was just afraid of hearing more Polish jokes.

Here's an interesting tidbit for you...

As you may remember from an earlier update there is a list of items we aren't allowed to have here and designated as 'contraband'. Most of these items are forbidden because they 'upset the local culture and sensibilities'. Therefore, we're not supposed to have things like alcohol or porn here since this is a muslim country. No big deal right? I mean, you really don't want all 7,000 U.S. soldiers here drunk, horny and armed with loaded M16s.

That would be bad.....

But, what doesn't make sense is that we serve pork (which is a big Muslim no-no) almost every day here. They sell pork rinds at the PX! And the PX and mess halls are

staffed by hajjis!

The other thing is that these rules only apply to US soldiers. Our coalition partners can drink and watch all the porn they want. Hey! Isn't that what we're fighting for! Our founding fathers started our great nation so that we'd have the freedom to sit on the couch like slugs, stuffing our face with fatty pork products while watching cinematic classics such as 'Star Trek: The next penetration' (Note: the title of that movie comes from a certain Star Trek geek-captain here in our unit. The really frightening part is that he loves Star Trek so much that the regular shows are like porn to him. He just gets WAY too excited discussing if the Romulans could beat the Klingons in a fair fight).

Well....that's it for this time.

Adios!

**15 Sep 03**

**Afghanistan Go Boom!!**

Yesterday we had a thunderstorm which was unusual for two reasons. First, in the two and a half months we've been here it's rained all of one time. The prospect of water coming from the sky therefore is a big deal. Secondly, this thunderstorm ended up not having rain. Just thunder. Afghanistan. Where even the storms are dry.

One other interesting point of note about the storm will give you a glimmer of what life's like here. At the first few rumbles of the storm I couldn't tell if it was, in fact, thunder or land mines detonating. We hear mines exploding here every day. Usually it's part of a planned de-mining

operation designed to make another small patch of land clear to farm, build or walk on. Less frequently (but still common) the detonation is unplanned when an animal or unluckily Afghan sets one off.

After awhile you can even distinguish between different types of mine. Anti-personnel mines (usually designed to take off a leg) make a small firecracker like pop in the distance. Anti-tank mines, in contrast, make a really big boom. Sometimes you can even feel the concussion of the explosion when it goes off. The first one I heard/felt made me think we were under rocket or artillery attack but everyone I saw around (those who had been here awhile) was acting like nothing had happened so I figured everything was ok. It's all pretty strange but the soon all but the closest and loudest of the explosions fade into regular background noise.

One day we were out driving, following up on a report of some weapons piled up on the side of a road. On the way we passed a small mound of freshly dug up earth which looked a lot like (what I imagine anyway) a grave. We were in the middle of nowhere however, with no signs of nearby civilization so I knew it couldn't be that. In a minute we were passed it and I didn't give the mound a second thought.

Shortly thereafter we came across a small group of nomads (called the 'Koochi') and began talking to them to see if they had any information about the area. At some point we asked about the presence of land mines in the areas off the road (the roads are generally pretty safe here, especially if they're paved). After a brief exchange, our interpreter (known by some as 'terps' but for some reason the term seems to have a negative connotation flirting with it so I avoid using it) said: "He said mines are all over here. His

uncle stepped on one today and died. They just buried him this morning over there." The interpreter pointed back down the road we had just driven and I realized my first guess about the mound of earth was correct after all.

Even though we were on a well traveled road and therefore, pretty safe, everyone's eyes dropped to the ground, looking for any sign that there might be mines under foot. The nomads aren't as lucky as us. The flocks of sheep they tend have to roam and the nomads have to follow so they don't have the luxury of being able to travel along well-worn and cleared routes. They walk the mine-strewn fields under the protection of the Afghan trinity: their flocks moving ahead of them to clear the way; the experience of past trips and those who've gone before to show what areas are 'safe' and what areas aren't (and a lot of that experience is learned the hard way); and finally the will of god.

People here in Afghanistan work and walk in minefields all the time. They have to in order to live and in order to cope with the constant thought that their next step might be their last (or at least their last with that leg) they've given in to fatalism. If they hit a mine, god willed it. If they don't, god willed that as well. If that's the case, a quick look around here would make you think that god's got stock in a prosthetic limb company. Scan just about any group of locals here and you'll see at least one or two missing an arm, leg, hand or foot.

It's going to be really strange to go home, look out at a field or a patch of grass and know I can walk anywhere out there without worrying or having to scan the ground trying to find footsteps to walk in. Now when I look out at a piece of ground that isn't definitely cleared I just think: "There is no way I'm walking over there."

I was talking to a friend of mine about writing this piece about land mines and we had this conversation:

Me: 'So anyway, I just wrote a bunch of stuff about mines.'

Friend: 'Really? When I went out yesterday ('out' is usually short for 'outside the wire' which is anything outside the perimeter of our base. Some people love going outside the wire and try to every chance they get. Others do everything they can to stay within the confines of our base. It really comes down to a personal preference. Getting outside the wire allows you to see and do something different than the dull routine of life here but, of course, it can involve some risk. It just depends on how stir crazy you get staring at the same small patch of land that's our base and how much your wanderlust acts up. Anyway.....back to the conversation...) we went to the range and right on the other side of this hill were tons of little mines in piles.'

Me: 'Cool, (I'm not sure that's the appropriate thing to say in this sort of conversation but I'm not particularly profound in spur of the moment conversations) were they anti-personnel mines?'

Friend: "Yep, lots of little silver mines."

Me: "Silver? Oh, were they egg shaped?"

Friend: "Yeah"

Me: "OH, those are the ones that split in two and detonate when rotated a certain amount of times....(blah, blah, blah)

I put this in here not to bore you to death but because right afterwards it struck me as really odd that I could have a conversation about seeing this type of land mine versus that type in the same way I'd normally talk about seeing a movie.

It's really a strange place here.

## LEMON-POPPY HELL

I have to admit our food here is pretty good. Given that they have to serve thousands of soldiers every day I really can't complain. Too much.

Deserts are pretty good as well. We have ice cream bars (usually my choice), a variety of cakes (not my favorite but other seem to like them) and occasionally pie (which bumps ice cream right off the play list). Now, usually deserts come and go. Some days they'll offer some things and other days will have different items but every day for every meal there is always an abundance of these lemon-poppy seeded cake things.

Now, I've never eaten one of these things since I've been here and I honestly can't remember seeing anyone else eat them either which leads me to wonder why in the world they would continue to serve these things. I've come up with some possible reasons.

- 1) The government is looking for alternative uses for all the poppy plants grown in Afghanistan since opium production is frowned upon.
- 2) The generals at the pentagon thought this would be a good opportunity to empty out all their WWII surplus food.
- 3) The guy in charge of ordering our food has a crazy uncle who had a 'sure-fire get rich quick scheme' to open up

a chain of Lemon-poppy themed fast food restaurants. When it fell through ('I don't understand it man, these things are HUGH in Europe.") he had to get bailed out.

4) Two words: lowest bidder

Anyway, I've take a live and let live policy with regards to these hellish pastries. As long as they don't bother me, I won't bother them. But I know they're out there.....waiting....plotting. Looking for me to have a moment of weakness and just lower my guard for a second. Then they'll attack.

Ok...the malaria pills are kicking in again. More psychotic episodes.

Hey.....there's one in every crowd...

My last update got some of my most positive reaction I've ever received. I had a number of people say some really nice things. As usual, our First Sergeant put the article in our monthly newsletter (after some heavy editing of course - there was nothing about college students going home early). It was really memorable though because I (indirectly at least) received my first bit of hate mail.

That's right. Hate mail.

This guy...let's give him a pseudonym since I don't like to use real names here. Something that won't easily identify him. How about Captain Boozehound? Anyway, I'm not sure what Cpt. Boozehound's problem was but he fired off an email to our First Sergeant. I'll quote it in its entirety here. Ready? Here it goes....

I know your're busy, but can you take me and my

family off the mailing list for this fine publication. After reading yet another of SSG Baratta's last whiny piss ant articles, I almost ripped my lap top out of the wall and threw it out the window. I also don't want my family getting doses of this negative bullshit. It surely does not help, both here and over there. Thanks for you help in this matter. I don't think I'm alone on this thought process...

Believe me...I couldn't make this stuff up. The first thing that jumps out at me as I read this is that the Army must really be scraping the bottom of the barrel to fill it's officer corps. What exactly is the definition of 'your're'? And how can I have 'another ....last article'? Be definition, your last article means that no more will follow it. It's not like I'm the Rolling Stones on one more 'last world tour'.

I have to admit I'm not sure what 'negative bullshit' he was referring to but I know the positive, upbeat attitude of his email makes me want to jump up and do a jig. Wow...who COULDN'T love a guy like this.

I just keep reminding myself that alcoholics denied their fix can get really grumpy.

Or maybe it's the fact that this circus freak escapee knows he a fraud of a soldier that couldn't lead his way out of a paper bag.

So, the long and short of it is because of this pinhead decided to buy 'Hooked on Phonics' and read my article as his graduation project my articles won't be added to our unit newsletter. BUT....I will not be silenced! I will smash these chains of oppression and bring my views to the masses! Readers of the world unite!!!



(By the way...Cpt. Boozehound, just in case you're reading this, feel free to ask if you don't understand anything here. I know I write at the 5th grade level and there's probably a lot of words here you can't understand. If you'd like I'll draw pictures next time.)

Anyway....

One other interesting thing about being here is that we're starting to see our doppelgangers around. Now for those of you who aren't familiar with the term, a doppelganger is sort of like an evil twin. We've seen two of these so far leading me to believe that there's a whole 'bizarro' unit out there made up of our opposites. So far, no one has met their twin face to face and quite frankly I'm not sure what would happen if they did.

Would they explode in a huge explosion like when matter and anti-matter collide? Would they have to fight to the death? Would they merge into some strange, new life form?

So I've been on the lookout for my doppelganger and started to think. What if I'M the evil twin? What if I'M the bizarro one? Hmmm.....how would I even tell (Please...I don't need a flood of emails confirming that, yes, indeed I am bizarre. The question is: Is there an even MORE bizarre one of me out there?)

**16 Sep 03**

A local warlord notified us that he had come into possession of a large number of rockets and wanted to give them to us as a sign of his good faith. The rockets were of a type commonly used in attacks on American bases because, basically, any moron can set one up and fire it.

Fortunately, it requires a little more skill to actually hit something with one and (so far at least) that's been the important bit. Almost all the rockets fired here either miss the base they were fired at or impact somewhere and don't do any damage. Still, the opportunity to get a few hundred of these things out of circulation is nothing to sneeze at and arrangements were made to pick the these roman candles on steroids.



1, 2, 3,.....dang! I lost count. Here are the rockets that the warlord handed over to us. I thought they'd take up a some more space.

The rockets were located at the warlords hilltop compound so we gathered all the necessary personnel and drove over to his place. His compound wasn't much to look at but it did have three things going for it: location, location, location. It was the highest piece of ground for several miles and perched right above a small village. Right away it made me think of some medieval noble with his castle overlooking his village of serfs. I have little doubt that a

very similar relationship exists here. These warlords (for all their polite banter and oaths of loyalty) are thugs who make their money and maintain their power through their ability to get a bunch of goons with AK-47s to do their bidding.

At his compound we found the rockets stored in a shipping container. Once they were checked out and it was determined that they were safe to move we started loading them onto trucks to bring them back to base to be destroyed. One really good thing about the military is that they do take things like moving things that go BOOM seriously. As a result, everyone took numerous precautions in loading and transporting these things. Our precautions were the source of much amusement among the local militia members who told us they'd just throw them into the back of a truck willy-nilly and hope for the best. Thank goodness I don't work for those guys! Their workman's comp claims must be through the roof.

While there, the warlord had some melons brought over for us to eat. That's nice. Even though the warlords here wouldn't think twice about killing you if they thought there was something to gain by it, at least they're considerate hosts.

Then, this guy decided to show us his compound. Basically it was a gutted out shell of a building, littered with sleeping mats, dirt and various bits of refuse lying about. As I was touring this hovel, the interpreter turns to me and says "He's really done a lot of work with this place. You should have seen it before he started working on it."

What?



**A face only a mother could love....and I'm talking about the OTHER guy! Here's the warlord that handed over the goods. He started fighting the Soviets when he was 15 and claims the Taliban imprisoned him for awhile because they didn't like his style.**

The only way a lot of work could have been done on this place is if it started as a livable building and this guy's plan was to dismantle the entire thing piece by piece. This is the sort of place that evil interior designers go to after they die. I'm convinced that ten minutes spent in this place would drive Martha Stewart totally and irrevocably insane.

This day was particularly strange since it was also my birthday. Oh well....at least I can say that the most unusual gift I ever got for my birthday was a couple hundred rockets from an Afghan warlord. I don't think anyone will be topping that story at the annual Christmas party.....

**18 Sep 03**

A helicopter pilot reported seeing 8 ‘rocket-like’ tubes about 5 miles from the base. Given some of the details in the report we dismissed the whole thing as B.S. and not a threat. After all, this country has been at war for over 20 years. There’s all sorts of unused and unexploded munitions lying everywhere. It’s really not uncommon to see bullets, bombs, mines, etc. just lying around as if someone dropped them accidentally. The point is, you can’t get worked up every time you see or hear about one of these things or you’ll have a nervous breakdown. The basic rule is: If it’s not a threat, leave it alone.

Unfortunately, not everyone sees it that way. Somebody high up on the food chain saw the report and apparently freaked out. He thought these ‘rockets’ were pointed at us and just waiting for Bin Laden to light the fuse. Now we told everyone in our command that we thought this whole thing was bogus and why. In fact, it was practically a ‘no-brainer’. So, all we needed was one officer to explain the facts to the Grand Poo-Bah and everyone could relax.

Sounds easy right?

Well, it seems that the officers who could do this are spineless wonders who would never even think of telling people above them they might be misreading the situation (my, my, the emperor has some wonderful new clothes, doesn’t he?) as that might reflect badly on their next review. Therefore, they all took the path of least resistance and shoved their heads firmly up the ass of the guy above them.

I was tasked (with others) to go to the local warlord’s house to see if he knew anything about this stuff. Given the time of day we knew he wouldn’t be around and said the trip

would be a waste but I was told “We need to be able to tell the general we’re doing something, so go.”

As an aside, I’m starting to note a reoccurring theme about my time in Afghanistan.

- a) I make a recommendation.
- b) It gets ignored.
- c) I end up being right.

You’d think the people in charge would figure ‘Hey, maybe Dean *does* know what he’s talking about after all.’ I’m not exactly bursting with confidence about the mental abilities of some of the decision makers around here.

So, to appease the general we go out on a mission we know is pointless. Even if the warlord is there what are we going to ask him. ‘Do you know about any tubes five miles away?’ Yeah, this guy would be really impressed with the level of detail we could muster about this. It would be like me coming to you and asking “What can you tell me about the piece of paper in your house?”

You would naturally reply: “What paper? Where?”

To which I would say: “I don’t know. I was just told to ask about some paper in your house.”

Sometime around here you’d call the nearest mental institution to see if they were missing any patients.

So....after a 45 minute drive we get to the warlord’s place and.....Surprise!.....he wasn’t there.

Back to the base we go. Meanwhile, a helicopter is sent back up to take some pictures of the site. Ends up they found a construction site and the 'rockets' were lengths of pipe.

While this may not seem like a big deal you should know that this little dog and pony show took up a full day of work for five or six people.

But that's not all!

A day or so later the first pilot found the 'rockets' again (at a site different from the construction site). I was even more convinced that this was nothing but what the hell do I know. All the guys with shiny stuff on their collars (who are much more qualified in this line of work than I. After all, they've read almost all of Tom Clancy's books. I've only got 12 years real world experience.) just HAD to impress the general so a team was sent out to check out these 'rockets'.

To be fair these tubes did, at least, have something to do with rockets. Unfortunately, they were useless, empty junk. The real kicker is that the team (of which I wasn't a part) had to walk through a minefield to find that out.

So let's review: Some guys were essentially told to play the lottery with their lives for information we already had just so these butt-heads could suck up. Great job guys! Nice to know that there are some officers out there who have no problem risking the lives of US soldiers for personal gain.

Just so you don't get the wrong idea. Not all the officers here are bad. Most, in fact, are highly competent and VERY concerned with keeping soldiers safe and getting the

job done. We, unfortunately, are cursed with a Triumvirate of Incompetents that seem bent on making stupid decisions.

I gotta get out of this place

**6 Oct 03**

Or.....What I did on my summer vacation.

After spending 90 days in country, all soldiers are entitled to four days of R&R (Rest and Relaxation) which is basically a free vacation. Now in past wars, soldiers were essentially given transportation to some place (Paris, Tokyo, Seoul, Saigon, etc.) and told to come back at a certain time.

Those days are over.

We get to spend out R&R time at an Army base in Qatar. Now don't get me wrong, there are some very nice amenities here (like flush toilets) but it's still an Army base. The last thing I want to do if given a little free time is spend it with a few thousand soldiers. So I'm feeling like I've been given a four day pass from a medium security prison to go to a minimum security prison. And I don't even get those conjugal visit privileges!

It all started at the building in Bagram where all outgoing personnel have to sign in and wait for their flight to leave. It's one room, about 25' by 25' with a TV against one wall, five or six rows of plastic lawn chairs and tons of dirty, tired, uncomfortable soldiers.

A group of five of us were going together and had to be there by 12:30PM. We weren't told what time we would be leaving but hey, this isn't JFK or anything. No complicated



baggage procedures here. No thousands of planes competing for air and runway space. One landing strip. A plane lands, refuels, takes off. Simple, right?

Six hours later we were finally on the plane getting ready to take off for a five and a half hour flight for what we all assumed would be, at best, the worst four days off on record, exceeding even the four days in 1957 experienced by David Kugelstein of Jeema, Illinois who won a four day vacation for being awarded Employee of the Year at Bill's Bigger Boy restaurant. David, who planned to spend his time off cataloging his Xavier Cugat record collection and displaying his vast collection of used bubble gum wrappers inexplicably found himself, instead, at the nexus of a conflict between two rival gangs in his hometown. A notorious motorcycle gang (the infamous 'Beelzebub's Bakers' a group of pastry chefs gone bad) was attempting to move in on the territory of another group called 'Sara Lee's Soldiers' (who were well known for using Tupperware in twisted and often deadly ways). Both groups met accidentally in David's kitchen and the resulting battle, in which both groups baked without regard for innocent human life, resulted in a confectioner's catastrophe of almost biblical proportions. When the flour finally settled, twelve people had died and that National Guard had to be called out to put down the riots. Poor David's house along with all of his possessions were completely destroyed with the one exception of the rare Cugat cover of Iron Butterfly's 'In-a-gadda-da-vida'.

But I digress.....

By the time we landed it was about 12:30 am, we hadn't eaten in over 12 hours and it didn't look like food would be in our future anytime soon. My ass was numb from being crammed into the seat of the transport plane. Things

weren't looking good.

So we funnel off the flight line and into a building where we get our orientation briefing. NOTE: The words 'orientation briefing' when used in connection to a vacation should be like a huge red flag indicating a 'no fun zone'. First, this being the Army, we were given a long list of things we better not even think of doing. Nothing like getting psyched up to have a good time by being threatened with courts martial while suffering from sleep deprivation and hunger pains.

After that cheery little interlude we got down to business: activities and things we could do for fun! I had been beguiled by some information I had received prior to coming here. In a slick presentation, the R&R people had mentioned a variety of cool things to do: Culteral tours, dinner cruises, jet/water skiing, going shopping, etc. etc. Certainly hearing more about these things would get us out of our funk and put us in the mood to have a good time.

'Now, we only have a limited number of seats for each tour' our guide (I'll call him Sergeant Virgil after the guy who guided Dante through the nine circles of Hell)said 'so we'll have a lottery for who gets to go on trips. Let's see....there are 35 of you so we'll pick 7 to go on trips.'

Let me just tell you what constitutes a trip here in Qatar. Two people got to go have lunch at Fuddruckers, two got to go to Bennigan's (by the way, Qatar is a dry country. No alcohol), one got to go to the mall and two won the grand prize of the jet/water skiing. Everything else (cruises, tours, hotels, etc. was canceled). The rest of us were on our own to try to find something to occupy our time here.

Things were further complicated after learning that the

only way you could get off post was to get a 'sponsor', someone stationed at Qatar who, out of the kindness of their heart, would become a tour guide for us. "Yeah, right. Fat chance" I thought. Fortunately I ended up being wrong about that but it's still a crap shoot. You've got to be in the right place in the right time.

I resigned myself to spending my time submitting slogans for this wonderful R&R program. I thought an appropriate one might read:

'Abandon all hope ye that enter here' (I know, that one's been taken but it seemed appropriate).

Actually, it wasn't nearly that bad and we, in fact, had a very good time. We were allowed a maximum of three beers a day (of which I hardly drank any) which was kept track of by issuing out little chits that you could buy for \$3 a piece. Then, when you wanted your brewski, you'd turn in your chit. A little black market was created (ah...economics at work) and I was able to sell my chits for \$10 a piece (giving me a hefty profit). I heard rumors of some people selling there chits for \$30 or even \$40 each but never saw that first hand. \$10 seems quite steep to me for a beer and if you're willing to pay a lot more than that you really should think about a twelve step program.

The R&R was also interesting in that I had my first ever 'professional' massage (no, not the kind you get in those seedy places that the cops raid all the time. A real one). It felt kind of weird and a friend of mine told me 'You feel a little violated the first time you get one.' Ain't that the truth! I think in some cultures I would have had to marry that girl after what she did. Although I do have to admit that it bugged the heck out of me when she was rubbing my feet. Ick! I really have to look into getting hooves....

Eventually this good time had to end and we prepared to hop a flight back to Afghanistan. If you think airlines are unreasonable in asking you to check in two hours before a flight, the military's procedure would probably give you a stroke. We had to show up at 4:30am, to get to the flight line around 5:30 am and wait for a flight that would leave around 10am. Now, in my experience I've never seen a military flight actually take off on time. Our flight, for example, actually took off around 2PM. During all that waiting time, you aren't allowed to go anywhere but the latrine because 'The plane might take off any minute.' Never mind that the plane isn't even there yet. You're still stuck.

About half way through our five and a half hour flight, we got word that something on the plane 'broke' and we'd have to turn around. By the time we made it back to Qatar we'd spent a majority of the previous 18 hours in either some cramped, uncomfortable room waiting to get on our plane or in our cramped, uncomfortable seats on the plane. I had mentioned before that upon arriving here my butt was numb from the flight. At this point it was past numb. I was worried I might suffer some permanent damage to the derriere.

But, tired though we were, I have to admit we were pretty happy. Maybe we'd get an extra day by the pool or get some more good food before we had to go back. In fact, maybe we'd hit the R&R lotto and get a few extra days off! Things were looking up.

Once we hit the ground things continued to look good when the word was put out that there were no scheduled flights for the next day and we might have to wait a day or two before we could get out. We were so busy dancing on

the deck that we never saw the iceberg coming.

Disaster took the form of a middle-aged (hey! I just realized, I think I actually fit in that category now.), overweight warrant officer who suffered from something I call 'WOF Syndrome' (for Waste of Flesh). People who suffer from this are under the delusion that they are so vital to the war effort (or, in the civilian world, the company's existence and productivity) that victory hinges on their presence. The severity of this disease seems to be inversely proportional to the person's actual importance. I think in some cases people find themselves in a combat zone and feel a little guilty that their job consists of counting rolls of toilet paper and so have to inflate their importance in order to feel better about themselves.

Others are just butt-heads.

We have a lot of people that play these stupid, brown-nosing, macho games like "Let's see how long I can look like I'm working so the commander thinks I'm important", and "I know I'm coughing up blood but sick call is for sissys". You can always pick these people out because they focus on HOW LONG they work versus what they actually do. In fact, they do very little and just take up huge amounts of time doing it. Sometimes they try to make others as miserable as themselves by trying to pressure you into feeling guilty and hanging around the office longer. I try to make it a point to get under their skin and look like I do less than I actually do.

So this knucklehead starts throwing a hissy fit about how he needs to get back as soon as possible or Bin Laden is going to make a big comeback and kick us out of Afghanistan or some such nonsense. The rest of us were exhausted and not at all looking forward to getting up at

3am and starting this whole thing all over again. I thought that this guy was looking a gift horse in the mouth and that to not stay would be tempting fate. I mean....what kind of idiot would turn down an extra day of vacation??

Apparently THIS guy.

All of his complaining paid off and we were told to be back at 4:30am and we'd be on another flight. Upon gathering the next day we were told that the plane could only take half of us and the other half would fly out in the afternoon. Our group was slated for the afternoon flight so we were facing another day of waiting in Purgatory. By the time we eventually did get to our plane we were anxious to get back to Bagram. Maybe that was the whole plan of the R&R program. Wear you out so much that going back to the combat zone is a relief.

So we loaded up on the plane and strapped ourselves in. While the crew were doing their pre-flight checks they encountered a little problem that had to be fixed. Off the plane we went while we waited for the repairs to be made.

I should mention here that Qatar is hot. Damn hot. And humid. So all this time we're sitting around, we're sweating like pigs (or whatever animal sweats a lot). You don't want to drink to stay hydrated or keep cool because you don't want to have to go to the bathroom in a C-130 (just trust me on this one. You can do it but it's not the best experience in the world). The result is everyone gets a little pissy and just wants to get the show on the road already!!

After a short while we're told that the problem is fixed and we get back on board. I note, in passing, that above the door to the plane is written 'The Gambler' and 'Do you feel lucky?'. It seems to me that these probably aren't the most

comforting thing to write on a plane. I guess it's better than 'What the hell? Let's give it a shot.' but not much.

So we lumber off the runway and head out to our Afghanistan.

Not so fast partner....

About 45 minutes out, one of the crew tells us that something on the airplane is broke and we have to turn around. Ok....no big deal. We're all a little annoyed that we'll probably be delayed another day but what can you do? I figure that it's something minor and that they have to return to base due to regulations more than any real safety issue. Then they tell us they have to shut down one of the engines. A C-130 has four of them so the loss of one isn't critical but it sure indicates a more serious problem than I thought. The final piece that topped it off was the crewman's instructions to us: 'When the plane stops, we're going to open the door and you have to run straight ahead 300 meters then wait for us. Don't run anywhere else but straight ahead!'

Uh, oh. This couldn't be good.

The flight back was tense (at this point I was feeling neither rested OR relaxed) but uneventful and as we were taxiing down the runway we got up and moved to the doorway and waited. The plane came to a halt and the crew shut off all power in the plane throwing the cabin into total darkness. A few of us had small lights and turned them on helping a bit but it was still dark. And quiet. And we waited for the crewman to open the door so we could get the hell out of there.

And waited....

After a few seconds of struggling, the crewman yelled 'I can't get it open!'

Great. I knew we should have taken this day off.

Now things were really getting tense. Here we were, stuck on a plane with a serious problem (at some point during this little drama I found out that an engine had caught fire), in near complete darkness and we couldn't get out. I started looking around and thinking that if this was a cheesy made for TV movie we'd start seeing smoke or flames right about then. The crew chief ordered another door opened but before that could be done, the first door came free and everyone was ordered out there.

As we ran away from the plane we saw several fire trucks, emergency vehicles and personnel standing by. Everyone got off safely, if a little wound up and ready for a drink.

So, back to base we went to try our luck the next day. They actually had us scheduled to get right onto another plane and fly out that night but it was clear that a number of us would have simply refused to get on a plane after the day we had up to that point.

I guess it's true that the third time's a charm because our next flight went well and we made it back the (relative) safety of Afghanistan. Whew....

**5 Nov 03**

I know it's been awhile since I've done one of my updates but, to be quite honest, there just hasn't been much of note happening here lately. So this is what I've managed to cobble together.



I've been spending a lot of time here thinking about porta-potties. Since that's all we've had here for four months (that's slowly changing, but more of that later) and I've spent my fair share of time in them I've tried to unlock their many secrets. First of all, people put a lot of time and effort in selecting just the right porta-potty. Everyone has different priorities they consider. It's important to get one with a working lock (For me anyway. Apparently, there are a few guys who don't feel the need to lock, or in some cases, even shut, the door. Maybe these weirdoes get some sort of cheap thrill by having someone open the door on them. Who knows? Now, what was I talking about before I started this digression?....). It's also good to have at least the appearance that it was cleaned recently which sometimes is difficult. Sometimes, the hajiis use our facilities and we recently found out they don't use them like we do. Instead of sitting on the 'pot' to do the ol' number 2, they actually squat over it with their feet on the toilet seat. On top of seeming very uncomfortable (how do you read in that position? What if you lose your balance?) it also requires good aim or you risk leaving your calling card on the seat for the next person. Let me just tell you now, Afghans are not known for having very good aim. While that's really good when they shoot at soldiers (they usually miss) it's bad when they're using our toilets (again, they usually miss). Finally, you really want a porta-potti that has a minimum number of flies buzzing around it and has the least disagreeable odor you can find. I feel like a kind when I can happen to stumble upon a porta-potti that's just been cleaned. It's only happened twice since I've been here (how pathetic is it that I've kept track of something like that?) but it really made my day. It was like hitting the lottery. I didn't want to leave.

I have to admit that I've always loved reading bathroom

graffiti. Most of the stuff is garbage but every once in awhile you find a true gem. Unfortunately, there's a vigorous anti-graffiti program here and they paint over everything almost as soon as the cleaners see it. The whole thing is very stifling to our creativity. Who knows how many potential Plato's are out there searching for the right medium to get their message out to the masses? It's a damn shame.

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It seems that at least once a day I have what I call an "Afghan moment". That's where I stop what I'm doing and say to myself "Holy S@\*t! I'm in Afghanistan! How the hell did I end up here?!" Then I start thinking about all the decisions I've made in my life that led to me being here. It's really quite amazing. Before 9/11 if you told me I'd end up here I'd have said that you need to check into the Betty Ford clinic quick (even with my weird vacation choices).

Last night, for example, we awoke to the sounds of mortars being fired (don't worry, they were ours and only firing flares, but they're still pretty loud and if you don't know they're coming - and most people didn't - it is quite easy to think that we're being attacked). Some people started getting worked up but most of the rest of us just rolled over in our cots and thought "Hey, if it's that important, someone will sound the alarm" and went back to sleep. Now, I never thought I'd be at a point in my life where I'd hear mortars being fired and figure sleep was more important than finding out what was going on but here I am! Welcome to the wacky world of Afghanistan!

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Well, we've passed the half way point on our little expedition here in Central Asia. We hope anyway. We're all a little nervous that they'll do with us what they did with

the troops in Iraq and tell us we'll have to stay here longer. To say we'd be bummed out by the news would qualify as quite possibly the biggest understatement ever. Everyone just keeps their fingers crossed and, since we haven't received any word about when we can expect to get the hell out of here, listen to rumors and make guesses on the flimsiest of clues.

One thing that is starting to happen is, slowly, everyone is getting infected with what's called 'Short Timer's Attitude'. It's what happens when you're leaving somewhere, never to return and you're really anxious to go. You tend to blow off things you normally wouldn't and just generally take a 'who gives a damn? I'm going home in (fill in the number) days!' We're still in the very early stages so we're able to keep mostly focused but I'm starting to see evidence of this creeping around the edges of everyday life. By the time we're set to get out of here almost nothing will be able to get us to care what happens here. I know this may not exactly fit the ideal of the brave, selfless soldier but it's true.

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A couple of days ago I was with a small group of people who went outside of the wire to meet with a group of nomads called the Kuchi (as in 'koochi, koochi coo' or 'hoochi, koochi woman'). They are among the poorest (and dirtiest) groups in Afghanistan but they're generally friendly and their lifestyle is so alien that they're always a source on interest to the Americans here. We didn't really have any sort of mission but we had the vehicles (which are always in short supply), an interpreter and some time so we figured we'd go out, chit-chat with the natives and take some pictures.

The Kuchi are getting ready to pack up and follow their

herds of goats and camels to better grazing grounds for the winter but some of them are still around. Fortunately, they're relatively close by so within a few minutes we were cruising into their territory.

These Kuchi tribesmen live in tents and look like extras from some biblical movie. You kind of expect Charlton Heston to pop out from behind some boulder with two big tablets and start doing his Moses schtick any minute. Like everywhere else in this country, once Americans pull over in their vehicles and get out, they attract a crowd. Two of the tribe's elders approached us and after some pleasantries invited us to have some tea. They also invited us to eat with them but, like I said, they're really dirty. Even our local interpreters advised against it. We did agree to the tea however, figuring that the boiling water would kill anything that might be mixed in there. So we followed the locals towards one of their tents. About half way there, our guides stopped and a man came out of the tent towards us carrying a large carpet which he spread out in front of us. So there we were, sitting in the middle of a barren wasteland, drinking tea with some nomads.

Every time you go out and leave your vehicles you need to leave someone behind with them to provide security. That's to prevent someone from planting a bomb in the car as well as to keep people from stealing everything not bolted to the frame. What inevitably happens is that while the main group of soldiers goes off to talk to the locals, the people pulling vehicle security are swamped by kids.

As I looked back at our vehicles while sipping some tea I saw that the same thing was happening this time too. It looked like the ice cream man had just come to town after an extended absence with kids everywhere around our vehicles.

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Speaking about porta-potties (see above) leads (naturally, I hope) to get you thinking about hygiene. There's so much dirt and disease here that you're encouraged to wash your hands again just about as soon as you've finished washing them. When you're not washing your hands you're usually reaching for Purell or some other anti-bacterial product. If I have to do this much longer I think I'm going to turn into a Howard Hughes (without the cash I'm sorry to say) and start wearing tissue boxes on my hands and feet.

I'm starting to notice some people becoming a little more lax in their hand washing habits. Some people blow right past the sinks at the chow hall (ok, maybe they just washed their hands before they got there) but I'm seeing more and more people leaving those porta-johns and walking right past the hand washing stations. Who knows? Maybe they figure that since we have to get 'de-wormed' anyway when we leave here, why not take a 'devil may care' attitude and get the full Afghanistan experience.

That's right, we have to get de-wormed when we leave here. Hmmmmmm. I guess my dog and I will be able to bond on some deeper level now that we'll have this experience shared between us. I can also relate to having to go outside to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. You see, the porta-johns are probably about 100 yards from my tent and with the weather turning colder that means if nature calls in the middle of the night you have to get dressed and bundled up, shuffle back to your tent, undress and get back to bed. Hopefully, the whole process hasn't woken you up to such an extent that it's difficult to fall back asleep. Maybe next time I have to let my pooch out on a cold December night I'll spare a little sympathy for

him.

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We just had a Halloween party here on the 31st of October. I think it had to be the first of it's kind in this country (and until someone can produce photos I'm sticking with that belief). You'll all have to wait until I get home to see my pictures of the party but as a teaser I'll just tell you that I went as Spongebob Squarepants and don't think I could have made a better costume if I was home.

Well, that's all I can think of this time. Take it easy

**19 Nov 03**

This was going to be my 'Thanksgiving update' where I actually took some time to list the things I had managed to be thankful for while living here in Afghanistan. Top of the list, of course, was going to be that we only had a short time left here until we got to go home. And then the Army produced it's oversized buttocks and let loose with such a wind that it blew my plans away.

We received word recently that we were extended here an extra three months so that when all is said and done we'll be here for nine months. Good think I'm not a girl or I'd probably be giving birth around the time we're going home seeing as how the Army screwed me (and, to be fair, everyone else). When they broke the news to us, they tried to soften the blow by saying that the next group due to come here is scheduled to be here for a full year. While I'm glad we won't be here that long that argument seems a little weak to me. It basically boils down to: 'Yeah, you're getting screwed. But cheer up! Other people are about to get screwed worse!'

Hooray!!

So, now we're just a little more than half way done with this little vacation. Yeesh.

You may remember an update or two ago I said that we hadn't had much rain since we got here. Well, it seems the rain god is trying to make up for lost time. We're on our third continuous day of rain. Fortunately, my part of the tent I live in is keeping out the rain (so far) but I'm always shooting a nervous eye up to the tent roof. I know it's only a matter of time until I'm woken up by the plink-plink or water dripping on my forehead. I guess this is one thing to be thankful for (See how I'm tying this whole update together thematically? It's almost like real literature. I'm hoping to work in some metaphors for Christmas.) because some people have tents that actually are more like sieves.

On a positive note, this rain has virtually eliminated the ever present 'moon dust' which seems to get everywhere. On the downside, all that fine, powdery dirt/dust has now turned to thick, adhesive mud that could entrap a mammoth if we were in the ice age. For some reason, the ground absorbs enough earth to create this mud soup and then rejects all further moisture leaving us with our own version of the Great Lakes. During the day, this provides us with some entertainment since we have to figure out the best route (the driest) to take to get to our destination. Sort of like when you see a rat running around a maze trying to get some cheese (speaking of rats, the colder air is encouraging the robust rodent population to seek warmer climates (like those found in our tents). We were always warned (a warning which we have ignored) not to keep food in our tents because it'll attract rodents and therefore attract snakes but quite honestly I'll put up with some mice

and cobras if I can get some nachos and salsa.

Ok....before I got sidetracked and talking about our mouse problem I was talking about the puddle problem. While during the day, navigating these ponds is little more than an Afghan brain teaser, at night the stakes are much higher. Much of our camp is un-lighted and we are discouraged from using standard, white-light flashlights (It can distract pilots flying at night and makes a nice target for snipers. Now, we haven't had any snipers but there's no need to send them an invitation). Instead we're encouraged to use red-lights which don't impair your night vision nearly as much as white light and, while still visible to would be bad guys, is at least a little less noticeable. The bad thing about red lights is that they make spotting puddles and big patches of mud difficult to see. All ground sort of takes on a uniform, solid appearance. You really only find out the contrary when you put your foot down in what you expect to be solid ground and sink up to your ankle. T

his usually happens on your way to or from the porta-johns too, making the whole trip take on the air of a cruel joke. You just know someone is watching the whole thing and chuckling to themselves.

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Since it looks like I'm going to be here I while longer I figured I'd give you all a primer on an interesting group of guys who figure very prominently in our lives. You may have heard of them when you watch or read the news from here. In the press they're usually called the Northern Alliance or referred to as private militias run by warlords. Here, they're known as the AMF (which stands for the Afghan Military Force) which really imparts much (MUCH) more structure and discipline to them than they



deserve. These guys are supposed to be the Afghan force that protects the country until they can build up a proper army. In reality they spend most of their time involved in a host of criminal activities, all designed to enrich the local warlord, usually at the expense of the poor peasants who try to scratch out a living here.

And the kicker? They're supposed to be our first line of defense and our allies.

To give you an idea of what it's like imagine (this comparison is for all my fellow New Jerseyites) if New Jersey decided the best way to fight crime would be to hire the mafia. The mafia, essentially in exchange for guaranteeing that no state employees are victims of crime, are allowed to extort, run protection rackets, drugs, and any other sort of criminal activity you can think of. In addition, the mob sets up 'checkpoints' on the turnpike and parkway and demands 'tolls' of all non-state employees. Finally, on pay days while your leaving work, some big, bruising guy with an AK-47 says you owe him half your pay check. I know what you're thinking: 'So, what do I need to use my imagination for? That's what happens anyway!' But it really is different. The locals here pay their tolls with the understanding that if they don't they could be looking at getting the crap beat out of them or worse. People that make \$5 a day have to hand half of that over to these guys. Of course, Americans get a pass. We can go where ever we want and can blow right be these checkpoints but it doesn't change the fact that they're still crooks. They like to pretend that they're an army but basically they're a bunch of thugs who managed to get hold of some AK-47s or some RPGs.

There is also one little piece of Afghan culture you should know about. In Afghan culture there really is no stigma

attached with betrayal or changing sides in a fight. In fact, a lot of the Northern Alliance fighters who helped us defeat the Taliban were Taliban fighters themselves before we got here. They saw the writing on the wall and figured it would be better for them to join the ol' Red White and Blue rather than meet Allah just now and became dedicated democrats and capitalists. If, in the future, it looks like things will be better for them to join the other side they will in a heartbeat and won't think twice. Neither will anyone else in the country.

These are really crafty guys too. You expect these guys to come up and say:

"Gee, nice army base you got here. It'd be a shame if something happened to it. You know....things break. Maybe you'd like to take out a little insurance. If I only had some money I could give people jobs and they'd be too busy to attack the base. But if we don't get money, well....people get bored and might just decide to launch a rocket at you, and hey, what could I do?"

See what I mean? They're all crooks. But they're OUR crooks so we have to play this weird game where we have to walk the line between letting them rob us blind and telling them to go 'F' themselves while keeping them from getting so mad they attack us all while trying to win their 'hearts and minds'. Sound fun? Yeah, it does to me too although I'd much rather be playing the home version of this game.

(By the way, if you get a chance Monty Python did a skit like this 30 years ago. If you get a chance watch it and you'll have all the all the background you need to life with warlords)

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After almost 5 months here we finally got beds! We were sleeping on army cots for all this time and I'm betting that you're thinking that I'll take this opportunity to say that this is one of those things I'm thankful for.

Well, it's not.

You see, the mattress we got with the bed is really misnamed. It's really more like a four inch sheet of plywood with a cloth covering on it. I really liked my cot. I had a little air mattress that provided just the right amount of comfort and the cot was just the right size for my hooch. The bed, on the other hand, is a monstrosity that takes up about half of my living space, further cramping me. My total living area is only about 10'x6' or so and in that area I've got my bed, a shelving unit, a chair and a night stand. I need to get that 'Trading Spaces' show here to create some innovative space saving designs (maybe with an art-deco motif!).

We didn't have a choice about keeping the cots either because there are so many troops here that they're running out of cots and so are trying to get these beds out to as many people as possible. It's like a bunch of relatives all came over for Thanksgiving and got too drunk to go home so now you've got to find some place for them all to sleep. Now, normally you could throw them out and let them sleep it off outside, but these relatives all have M-16s so things could get a little ugly. Best to just give them the cots.

Ok...that's all for this one.

Take it easy and have a great holiday!

P.S. In all seriousness there is one thing I am VERY thankful for this year. I'm not in Iraq!

Other things I'm thankful for:

My sleeping bag: The new army sleeping bags are the best! I love mine. Of course, the army didn't have any when we were getting deployed and I really didn't want to take the WWII surplus one they were going to give me so I had to buy one. Definitely worth the price (about \$300)

Portable DVD players: I don't think I'd ever buy one myself or ever use it anywhere but here. BUT.....here it's great.

Nachos and salsa: A good alternative to bad mess hall chow

My flak vest: we've got the good ones with ceramic plates in them. I hear a lot of people in Iraq have the cheap-o ones that basically don't do anything except slow you down since they weigh about 25 pounds.

And of course.....all of you wonderful people. Well...some of you anyway. Not you in the back there. How'd you get in here anyway? And stop picking at that! - uh oh....I think the malaria pills are kicking in again- I'd better go before the psychotic episodes really start kicking in....

Bye!

**25 Dec 03**

Before I begin this update I'd like to take this opportunity to wish all of you a great holiday. So....here we go.

Have a great holiday.

Ok, now on with the update....

I know, it's been quite some time since my last update. To be honest, I thought there was nothing left to write about here in Afghanistan. I figured that I'd said everything I could about my experience here.

And then, the good ol' war saved the day.

I was fast asleep one night when I was woken up by a sound similar to that made when a jet engine shuts down (for those of you not familiar with that, it also sounded a little like when a vacuum cleaner is turned off). In fact, it sounded like it was right over my tent. The sound faded away, followed a second or two later by a fairly sizable 'BOOM!'

I knew right then that I was experiencing my very first rocket attack. Ahhhh.....good times. Now I have something to talk about when I'm hanging out at the VFW drinking \$1 draft beer and talking to all the other old soldiers.

Now, when you're under attack your supposed to grab your weapon, put enough clothes on to maintain modesty (although I think that's optional depending on the severity of the attack. If rockets were raining like cats and dogs I don't think I'd stop to throw on my clothes. Besides, I do have really cool underwear so it might even be a sort of morale boost. At least for the chicks.) and prevent frostbite and either go to a shelter or some other place to report for

duty. An announcement is generally supposed to occur at this same time in order to tell people where to go, what to do and other important information. It's usually a good system but unfortunately, so many things go 'BOOM' here that you tend to blow off anything that doesn't have an announcement with it.

So I'm getting my clothes on and listening for that big voice to tell me what to do.

And I wait....

And I wait....

It seems like forever but it isn't more than 5 minutes when I decide to just go to work and find out for myself. On my way I realize that I have to 'use the facilities' and alter my course to the nearest port-a-john. My thinking was that either;

1) This was a real attack and once I report in I'd probably get locked down in a bunker or put right to work and not be able to go to the bathroom. I can live with the idea of getting shot at but I shouldn't have to go through the experience with a full bladder.

2) This whole thing was some sort of false alarm in which case there really wasn't any rush and I might as well go.

Either way, I was going to pee.

So I get to the port-a-john, open the door and just then the loudspeaker kicked in. 'Alert! Alert! Alert! This is not a drill!' Great.

I figured I'd risk the embarrassment of getting killed in a porta-potty and did my business before showing up at

work.

The thing that really got me mad about this whole episode was that the attack took place around 2:30 a.m. What the hell?! How am I supposed to get a decent night's sleep when some Taliban knucklehead is lobbing rockets at us? You'd think they'd at least have the courtesy to do this sort of thing during normal business hours so that it would break up my day.

So I made it to the office (I know, 'going to the office' doesn't sound like the sort of thing you should do when you're under attack. It should be something like....'We dived into our foxholes' or 'I formed a patrol and went out looking for bin Laden' but I just went to the office.) and soon realized that there wasn't much to do except sit around and wait for the 'All Clear' signal when we'd be allowed to go back to bed. I had absolutely no idea how long that would be however so I decided to make a big cup of tea and wait.

About an hour later we were given the official 'Okey Dokey' to return to our tents. It then began to dawn on me that perhaps I didn't think through my plan very well. I had just saturated my system with caffeine and now I had to try to get some sleep. Not only that, but tea (as you probably know) is a diuretic so was looking forward to numerous long, cold trips to the 'facilities' over the next few hours. If you remember my last update I recounted the laborious process of having to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. By the time I got up that morning, I had the process down to a science having repeated it so many times.

Mental note: Watch what you drink before going to bed when the bathroom isn't 'just down the hall'.

I know 'rocket attack' may sound pretty dramatic back home but the thing to keep in mind is that here in Afghanistan, the bad guys seem to have a very difficult time in actually hitting anything with their rockets. It usually strains their abilities to the limit just to hit something the size of the air base so the odds of any one particular person getting hit by one of these things is pretty low. In fact, getting hit by a rocket is a sign that you are having a REALLY bad day.

As I thought about the attack I started to feel sorry for the guys who launched it. I mean, these guys are giving everything they got to do battle with the U.S. Army and all they can manage to do is give me a bad nights sleep. Quite honestly, they would have been more effective if they just poked me with a stick every 15 minutes and told me to wake up. In fact, one time they apparently fired some rockets at us and we didn't even know it for a couple of weeks. They didn't come close to the base and some of the locals told us about it. How embarrassing is that? You launch an attack and the 'victims' don't even know! If they keep going like this they're going to have some serious self-esteem issues soon.

Well...that's not entirely true. Part of our retaliation plan for the attack was that we canceled our bazaar. The bazaar is held here every Friday and it gives the locals the opportunity to sell their junk in exchange for cold, hard cash. Since it's the only place we have to spend money (apart from the PX and the Internet) the vendors really make some good scratch.

So in addition to ruining a good nights sleep, they prevented me from going to the bazaar and buying my trinkets and baubles. And a week before Christmas!! What kind of monsters are these!!



So it's Christmas day today and some units did one of the coolest things I've ever seen. They decorated their vehicles, dressed up like Santa and other Christmas notables and we had a parade through the camp. Stay tuned for the pictures!

**18 Feb 04**

I'm writing this from my latest adventure location: the hard, cold floor of the airport terminal at Incerlik, Turkey. I went home briefly and have been trying to get back to Afghanistan for a week now. That's right, in seven days I've managed to go from Baltimore, Maryland to Turkey. I think I would have moved faster if I took a ship. But let me not jump ahead. This is a story that needs to be told.

Like I said, I had to go home briefly and while I was there a short while I decided to get ahead of the curve and time to insure a smooth trip back to lovely Bagram. You see, it wasn't uncommon for people to take 6, 7, 8 or more days to get back from the states. Everyone always whined that it was really hard to get a flight back but all of us who hadn't gotten to go on leave really knew that people were just dragging their feet and stalling in order to have a few days to enjoy some German beer. I'd show 'em. I'd get back in no time and spotlight all those losers.

So, a week before I was due to start heading back I called the number I was given for the Air Force people who handle all the flights out of Baltimore (that's where I had to fly out of). I told the lady that I was on leave and needed to get back to Afghanistan. I was expecting some highly efficient (if slightly impersonal) bureaucratic process to take over at this point and whisk me back to my unit.

Instead, I was asked what kind of leave I was on. Seemed a bit strange but I figured that must determine which set of forms they have to fill out in triplicate. I told the woman I was on 'Emergency Leave' (which is just that, usually reserved for illness, death or some traumatic family event - and let me just say here that everything is fine back home now. Let me get back to the story, it gets better.) instead of R&R (which is just like a regular vacation). Well, that seemed to gum up the works. The lady on the other end of the phone told me that she can only book people back who are on R&R leave.

Ok....seems a little silly to me but hey, welcome to the machine, right? So, who do I call?

She didn't know that.

Hmmm.....fortunately I actually had a couple of different numbers to call to arrange transportation back so I didn't panic. Maybe one of the others would pan out or at least be able to point me in the right direction. So, I called the next number on the list and told my plight and need to get to Afghanistan. The person on the other end of the line said that there was a flight going on the 9th and the 16th. Unfortunately, my leave ended on the 12th and there was NO way I was going back early. I told her if the army wanted to give me a few extra days off I wouldn't complain but I needed something, signed by someone in authority explaining my absence. Guess what? No one wanted to do that so they couldn't help me. They recommended I call my travel office which would be fine if we had a travel office. I had one number left. If this didn't work I was thinking I'd be forced into a life on the run since going AWOL was beginning to look like an easier time than hitching a flight back to Afghanistan. Besides, I hear Canada isn't that bad.

Ring, ring.....I speak to the army guy in charge of getting soldiers out of Baltimore. He tells me 'Just show up on the 12th and we'll get you to Germany.' I ask him about getting to Afghanistan and he just tells me that he can't help me there but he'll get me to Germany. This is where I encounter the Army philosophy about returning from leave 'It doesn't matter if you ever get to your final destination or not, just so long as you keep moving.' I'm guessing that someone is tracking how long soldiers are in one place and if they see people sitting in one location for awhile, angry phone calls and threats of poor reviews start to flow. In order to keep the powers on high happy, therefore, the airport people shuttle people wherever they can. Actually getting them to where they are supposed to go is secondary to getting them out quickly. After all, the only person who's going to care if you get stuck in some backwater army post is the guy there responsible for moving soldiers on. So, not sure of what I'll do once I'm in Germany, I take off into the great unknown.

The plane I manage to hop on is one that is filled with soldiers heading to Kuwait and Iraq. Whew.....good thing I'm not going with them. As soon as we arrive in Germany, I hop off, get my bag and go to the Air Force counter. They tell me that there are, in fact, three flights headed off to Afghanistan in the next 24 hours. This was going to be no sweat. I KNEW all those people were faking those stories about not being able to get a flight out of Germany and into Afghanistan. Losers. I decide to hang around the airport since I don't really have enough time to do anything or go anywhere. So, feeling quite smug, I settle down and relax.

A few hours later I see some people from my unit who are getting off regular leave and say 'hi'. It's then that I find out that the first flight is delayed and we need to be at the

airport at 3:30am. Great. That's too long to stay in that dreary terminal so I go off post and get a hotel room. I'm at least going to get decent meal, a hot shower and a few comfortable hours sleep before I head out to Bagram. We all meet up in the lobby and trudge over to the airport, a bit bleary eyed, but ready to head out. Well.....the 3:30am flight was canceled but there's another leaving at 7am and one at 7:10 am. We're a little pissed but hey, what can you do? This is a war after all. So we go up to the USO lounge and crash out on some couches. A few hours later we go down to the Air Force counter again only to find out that those planes aren't taking passengers.

Ok....time for Plan B. So when IS the next flight to Afghanistan? The Air Force doesn't know. They give me a couple of phone numbers to call to see if another air base has flights to Afghanistan but it's the same thing. No flights scheduled and no idea when there will be any. I'm starting to get a bit cranky at this point. I go to tell the group (there was about six of us and I was the highest ranking of the bunch) what the status is when this Air Force guy comes over to us and starts babbling in some language I think he thinks is English. He starts blabbering and hands out these pieces of paper for us to sign and then tells us that we'll be staying in 'tent city' until we fly out.

Strike one.

I start reading this letter that he handed us and it's got all sorts of weird rules on it.

You HAVE to stay in uniform while there. (I've got one uniform. I have NO idea how long I'll be here. How are you ever going to enforce this?)

You CAN'T drink any alcoholic beverages while there.  
(Oh yeah.....If you didn't want me drinking you shouldn't have sent me to Germany. )

You CAN'T leave post while here. (Seeing how I did yesterday I figure this rule doesn't apply to me. I must be grandfathered in since I've already left post. Right?)

I really felt that this, in and of itself, was sufficient justification for me to disobey these rules. My line of thinking was 'Hey, if you don't want me doing these things, send me to Afghanistan. Otherwise, get off my back.'  
Then one of the guys in my group said that he did, in fact, stay at the tent city the night before and it was a disaster. They didn't even have sheets and a pillow to give the guy. Just a cot.

Nope. Not for me.

The guy with the weird language came back and asked for the papers to be signed (signing them indicated you read and would obey all those moronic rules). I didn't want to lie so I told him I wasn't going to sign it since I would be staying at the hotel off base. I then looked to my group (I felt like Moses guiding my people to the promised land) and said 'If you want to stay here you can. If you want to be comfortable and don't mind paying for a room out of your own pocket, follow me.'

One guy stayed in the tent.

After that, things kind of fell into a routine. I'd check with the Army and Air Force for flights going to Afghanistan. They'd tell me there was nothing. If they felt bad for me they'd tell me that if I was going to Kuwait I'd have no problem getting a flight. Yeah, and if I was going to the

states I'm sure I wouldn't have a problem getting a flight either but I'm guessing Uncle Sam wouldn't be happy if I did that. Then, one night, while at the hotel bar I start talking to this guy who is also trying to get to Afghanistan. He tells me that there's a flight going to Kyrgyzstan on Tuesday (It was Sunday) and from there we could get to Afghanistan. I was sure we'd get out before then but I thanked him for the information. Quite honestly though, I didn't see how we wouldn't be able to get out of there well before then.

Tuesday we're still hanging around Germany and signed up for the flight to Kyrgyzstan. The most frustrating thing about the whole deal was that I got more good travel information from a dude in a bar than three days of talking to the 'official' Army and Air Force people. But, the tough times are behind me. This flight should be a straight shot (with a short stop in Turkey to refuel and drop off a couple of people) and then it'll be a breeze to pick up a flight to Bagram. It's taken a little longer than I thought but I guess 4 days traveling isn't too bad. At least I'm not one of those slackers that takes 8 or 9 days to get back. Losers.

One thing that I really noticed while trying to get back was how marginalized all of us serving in Afghanistan are. We're an afterthought (at best) when compared to the Iraq. We could see it on the news when you could go weeks at a time before you even heard the word Afghanistan let alone anything more than blurb scrolling across the bottom of the screen (usually while the newscaster is talking about Iraq). Even the Army disses us. They had a 'Year in Review' show and after 28 minutes of Iraq stories they wrapped up the show with something lame like 'And U.S. forces continued operations in Afghanistan, Kosovo and other countries across the world.' Hey, thanks a lot. I kind of expect someone to say: "Afghanistan? Didn't we win

that war already? I didn't even know we still had soldiers there." Don't let the press releases fool you, kids. In every category, Afghanistan gets the scraps that Iraq picks over. Well.....I guess that's fair. After all, the terrorists and masterminds behind 9/11 were from there. Oops. Sorry, no they weren't. What country were they from again?

The flight to Turkey goes well and we get off the plane for an hour or so to stretch our legs. Then an announcement comes over the loudspeaker saying that there's bad weather in Kyrgyzstan and the flight is being delayed a few hours.

Uh oh.

A few hours turned into 4 days. I have to admit though, it wasn't too bad. We had nice rooms, good food and great weather. The only drawback was that we had to keep reporting every 6 or 8 hours to see if the stupid plane could take off. Oh, yeah, one more thing. They wouldn't let us take anything but our carry on bags off the plane so, unless you wanted to get really funky you had to buy new clothes and toiletries.

We were in Turkey so long, in fact, that we had to be in processed by Turkish customs. After that, we were told we could go anywhere on post that we wanted but that we weren't allowed to leave the base. I didn't think that applied to me because I really wanted to see what was going on off post so my little group and I spent one morning wandering through the Byzantine rules and regulations in order to get a pass off post. Now, I felt that if they really didn't want us off post they would have made it harder to get an off post pass. But, within a couple of hours we all had nice, laminated passes that allowed us to leave the post whenever we wanted. That rule must have been put out just for show or to keep out the riff raff. So

we at least got to spend a few hours wandering Turkish streets buying all sorts of baubles and trinkets. In fact, we were starting to get a bit spoiled. We were thinking that if we just had a few more days here that would be perfect. But, that was not to be and our plane left early the next morning for Kyrgyzstan. After hearing about bad weather for four days we expected to land in a winter wonderland. Instead, the place was sunny, in the 50s and dry as a bone. If I was the suspicious type I'd assume there was something wrong with the plane and they just didn't want to worry us.

By the way, the airline we flew on was 'Omni International'. Yeah, I never heard of it either. Apparently, the U.S. Government thinks that it gets better quality and safety by going with the lowest bidder. I don't mind low frills but this is 'no frills' travel. The only time you hear about airlines like these is when they crash with a couple of hundred people on board. Great.

We finally take off.....after 8 days of travel I finally arrive in.....Kyrgyzstan. Well, at least I'm in the right part of the world now and just about in the right time zone. You have to fly military planes to actually get into Afghanistan so the DC-10 we're flying can't go any further. There were more than 200 soldiers trying to get back to their units or entering Afghanistan for the first time. Unfortunately, the planes the military uses to get soldiers in country only take about 50 people at a time. That means there's going to be a backlog and we're going to be stuck again. The delay is shorter however (only a day and a half) and not too bad since the post is fairly comfortable (although much more austere than Turkey or Germany. Think of it as a half-way house for getting to Afghanistan. You live in tents, but there's espresso available.)



The whole odyssey took nine days. Almost as long as my leave itself. All in all though I can't complain. Every day I was out of Afghanistan, even if I had to put up with tons of Army crap, was better than a day in Afghanistan. But, on the bright side, we should (finally) be on our way out of here soon. We're still getting jerked around and no one can give us a straight answer as to exactly when that will be but it's got to be close.

As long as I'm out of here by election time. I know one Texan who isn't getting my vote.

**17 March 04**

**I think my watch is broken....**

Einstein theorized years ago that the closer you got to a black hole the slower time progresses. With (hopefully) little more than a month left before we leave this giant litter box know as Afghanistan I've made an interesting discovery. By some strange coincidence, it appears that our base here is located right on top of the grand-daddy of black holes. I base this conclusion on how freakin' long every day seems to be here. In the mornings we look forward to lunch. In the afternoons we look forward to dinner. Then, we get up and do it all over again.

I'd like to at least say that we're doing something valuable here but to be quite honest just about everyone seems burned out by this point. Everyone's pretty tired of hearing 'Well, it looks like we'll be here just a little longer. But we're REALLY going home after that!' and productivity is plummeting. I should know, I spend most of my day looking around to see if anyone is still working. Just about

the only people scurrying around are those trying to impress their boss but they don't really count since their devoting all their energy into looking busy rather than actually being busy.

### **Does the Army issue you bananas too?**

One of the guys in our unit just came back from a couple weeks at this little firebase that they're constructing. Here at Bagram, we're the largest base in the country and conventional wisdom would have it that we have the most amenities and comfortable living standards. So when I saw this guy I asked him if he was glad to be back.

'No way. Base X (that's what I'll call it here) was great!'

Then he told me what they've got there. Locals come by the base every day to sell stuff while we haven't had a bazaar since the middle of December. The official reason we don't have one is 'security concerns'. Of course, everywhere in the country has security concerns yet we seem to be the only ones without a bazaar. That just encourages everyone to take shopping trips to Kabul under the thinly veiled guise of some 'operational mission'. I'll leave it to you. Which seems safer, bringing locals to us, where we can search them and control what's going on or having a couple hundred troops drive about an hour to shop in a crowded city where bombs go off like popcorn?

Yeah, seems pretty clear to me too.

Apparently Base X also has monkeys! I don't have all the details but apparently monkeys live nearby and they have a few on post. I'm not even allowed a dang pet rock here and they have monkeys.

I want a monkey! Where's my monkey?!

Well, I don't really want a monkey. I settle for a dog though. At this point even a stuffed one.

### **Can steroids be far behind?**

On a bright note, I've started going back to the gym again. Now you don't just 'go' to the gym. There's actually quite a bit of planning required in order to make your work out experience rewarding. First you have to pick the right time. The gym is rather small and there's a bazillion soldiers here just as bored as you and thinking that this is a great time to start working out so the ideal time to go is when all those bozos are doing something else. Once you figure out the best time to go in order to get on one of the machines or get to the weights you have to be careful who is sharing the gym with you. I've always worked out by myself so I'm a little picky when it comes to the conditions under which I'll work out.

One of the most important rules is that I can't be overwhelmed by other people's noxious body odor while I'm working out. It just ruins my concentration and grosses me out. Usually it's not too bad but when the Egyptian troops are working out at the gym I make a bee-line right for the door. I'm not sure if these guys don't know what deodorant is or they don't bathe frequently or what but those guys STINK! I can smell them from ten or more feet away and almost immediately start to turn green and scramble for the fresh air. Now I don't expect people to smell like the lady at the perfume counter at Macy's while working out but how about no smell instead of 'peel the paint off of cars' body odor?

They do play music in the gym too but most people bring their own walkmans. The music choices the gym people make can be a little weird sometimes. The other day they were playing this generic techno-pop stuff that made me think I was in some trendy women's clothing store in a mall. The only thing missing was the disinterested seventeen year old girl chewing gum and asking if I needed any help finding anything (Not that I frequently shop in women's clothing stores or anything. I just know this stuff because I pass these stores. And no, I don't know how that skirt got in my bag and, yes, I do think it's an incredible coincidence that it happens to be my size. Now if you don't mind I've got a story to finish.)

### **Did you see that Monet exhibition in stall 4?**

Another good thing about the place is that we've got real toilets now. There are still porta-potties around but if you've got that need for porcelain you can get it. It's still a hike from our tents and work areas and it's more a communal thing than an individual bathroom but hey, I am not complaining. Running water is definitely my friend. Now that we have these bathrooms and they're clearly marked 'Male' and 'Female' I'm interested to see how the sexes graffiti up their bathrooms differently.

The male bathrooms tend to focus mainly on bodily functions and pictures of varying quality of the human anatomy. Now, you'd guess that there would be lots of pictures of females drawn on the ways but in fact (and a bit disturbingly), it seems that there are way too many guys drawing pictures of wieners out there. I'm not really sure what the purpose is but it kind of creeps me out. I'm not sure if that's what they like to look at or they're just drawing 'what's at hand' (like other artists would paint a bowl of fruit) but it doesn't seem right. I can't imagine

chicks drawing pictures of naked chicks on the bathroom wall (although, that might be kind of cool) so I'm not sure what's behind all this. To make things more mysterious, I don't even know how to find an answer to this burning question. I can't just go around and randomly ask guys: 'Hey, have you ever drawn a wiener in the bathroom stall?' I'll get punched in the face! I'm all for progress and expanding the limits of human knowledge but I don't want a black eye. And who would ever admit to drawing a wiener in the bathroom (or anywhere for that matter)? I mean, why would a guy do something like that? What's the motivation? It's not like some art museum is going to do a 'Wieners through the ages' exhibit and take this knuckleheads doodles and display them. Hmmm....maybe someone out there knows a psychology professor or something who can enlighten me on this subject.

I can't find any chicks who will tell me about the graffiti in the women's latrine but I'm working on developing some spies who can give me the real poop (so to speak). Be rest assured, gentle reader, as soon as I get the poop, I'll pass it along to you.

Like I said we have actual running water available to us know just about whenever we want it. It isn't like the water that comes out of your taps in the states though. The water we have is referred to officially as 'gray water'. That appealing term means that the water is disinfected (which means we won't get some weird disease from it) but there are signs everywhere warning us that it's not suitable to drink. I'm not sure what could be in the water that would make it disinfected but not safe but I'm sure it can't be good. It's probably loaded with some weird radioactive elements that will make me grow a third arm or something. You can tell that no one in the army has ever taken a

marketing course. If we were in the real world, something as unappealing as 'gray water' would get some nifty packaging and a much better name. Even if they still called it gray water but just did it in a different language it would sound better. How about 'l'eau de gris' or 'agua acinzentada'? I bet you'd be willing to pay top dollar for something like that.

**Just when I thought Afghanistan couldn't surprise me any more.....**

There isn't a lot of wildlife in this part of the country. Apparently the animals around here learned a lesson long ago that the people still haven't picked up yet. If you live in a mud hut and are surrounded by land mines and people trying to kill you, it might be a good idea to move to another neighborhood.

But this morning I was greeted to the sounds of migrating ducks, showing me that the animal kingdom hasn't abandoned this country yet, even if they just use it as a pit stop. I should clarify the whole experience however. When I say that this happened 'this morning' I should say that it was dark, everyone was still sleeping but it was after midnight so, technically it was morning. The sound wasn't the pleasant 'quack quack' we hear in the states as a couple ducks swim around some pond dipping their heads in the water for a quick snack. Instead, it was a mass quacking episode loud enough to wake me out of a sound sleep and keep me up for hours. At one point I was tempted to take my M-16 and fire off a couple of rounds to keep them quiet. I thought better about it though when I realized that I would have had to fire towards a bunch of tents holding special forces troops. The last thing I needed was a bunch of trigger happy 'special operators' thinking that my tent is the new headquarters for the Taliban.

Usually at night my sleep is interrupted courtesy of the U.S. Air Force who seem to think that the middle of the night is the ideal time to rev all the jet engines they have up to see how much noise they can make. To be fair though the Air Force planes aren't nearly as bad as the navy and marine planes. I'm pretty sure that when the navy and marines order planes they include in the product specifications that the thing has to be able to blow out your eardrums from a mile away. Of course, the navy and marines thought the Air Force had a great idea, and shortly after arriving here, starting tinkering with their engines all night too. (Now, if you were paying attention you should have seen something strange in the last paragraph. Yep, we actually have a contingent of navy personnel here. If you're still not sure why that's weird take a look at a map of Afghanistan. There isn't an ocean anywhere near this country. Not even a decent size lake. I'm thinking this is some sort of elaborate deception plan to keep Al-Queda guessing about what's going on.)

On the bright side, both the birds and the planes do eventually stop making noise. Usually right after the sun comes up and I have to start getting ready to go to work.

So, I'm listening to this cacophony of birds for a couple of hours and I finally accept the fact that I just won't be getting any more sleep. Fortunately, since it's St. Patrick's day we had a 'fun run' organized around the perimeter of the base (a little more than 6 miles). Now, I run fairly frequently but I still have trouble putting the words 'fun' and 'run' together. I originally had no intention of doing the run because:

1) I had done it once already and really saw no reason to do a repeat performance. I had, as they say, done that and gotten the T-shirt (Literally, I've got a T-shirt attesting to the fact that I ran in BIG, BIG circle in Afghanistan). Once

you get one of those it's hard to recapture the high of the first time. Kind of like heroin.

2) The run started at 5:30 in the morning and my first response to someone who recommends getting up that early to run 6 miles is probably the same as yours would be: 'Are you out of your F'ing mind?!'

Since I had nothing better to do I figured that this was the cosmos' way of telling me I should get off my tuckus and run. Besides, maybe it'd be fun.

See what my life has come to? The high point of my day involves getting up at five in the morning so I can run six miles.

I'm going to need lots of therapy when I get home.

### **Charge it!**

We do have other things to look forward to while here. There's lunch, dinner and the PX. The holy trinity that keeps me relatively sane and breaks up my otherwise bleak day into bite size chunks.

The PX is small but does have a constantly changing inventory. The key to shopping there is when you see something you think you might even slightly want at some point, get it because if you wait and come back in a day or two it'll be gone and it'll NEVER be restocked again. That also means that you've got to go and check the place out every day or two or you just KNOW that you'll miss out of the really good stuff. Like I said, that works well for me because it introduces some structure into my day. So today while I was there I was perusing the CD rack and was compelled, by some unknown force, to buy a CD of Jimmy



Buffet's greatest hits. Now, I don't have anything against Jimmy but the only song of his I really know is 'Margaritaville' which just happens to be the first song on the CD. So I walk to the counter, like some sort of consumer zombie unable to put the damn thing down even though I realize there's a good chance I won't ever get past track 1 on this thing.

I'm starting to realize that it's just easier to accept fate, buy the dang thing and get out of there. Otherwise, I'd just wander around the PX for 15 minutes (and it's not that big so I would just walk in circles like a mental patient) and end up buying the thing anyway. So, I shuffled off towards the cashier and got in line. Since the PX is the only store we can get to there is always a line and accompanying wait. Today it was a little longer than usual so I was preparing to settle in for a wait in one of three lines snaking towards the registers.

Then.....I hit the lottery.

A lady came up and said 'People paying in cash go to the right. People paying with a credit card go to the registers on the left.' Then it was like the seas parted for Moses as everyone moved to the cash only lane and I saw a clear shot to the register. I had the cash but one look at that line and I decided that it didn't matter if I only had a seventy nine cent toothbrush to buy, I was putting this on plastic. So, I zoomed up to the front of my line with a self satisfied smirk on my face and thankful that I had a good credit rating.

So, while I thought the high point of my day was going to be the run, in fact, it was getting an express pass to the front of the line at the PX so I could buy my Jimmy Buffet CD that I'm not sure if I'll listen to.

Like I said, I'm going to need lots of therapy when I get home.....